Owari no Chronicle Volume3

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AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉

マイナス概念による世界の崩壊を防ぐため、全竜交渉部隊（チームレヴァイアサン）の長となった佐山（さやまみ）御言（ごと）が、次に相対することになったのは、2nd-Gと呼ばれる日本神話の八叉（やまた）を概念核にもつ世界だった。

2nd-Gは60年前の概念戦争で既に滅び、現在はLow-G（しかも佐山と同じUCAT）に帰属しており、交渉は簡単に成立するかに思えた。だが、過去の遺恨を残した彼らとの交渉は難航し、新たな戦闘へと発展していく……。

選ばなければならない未来への２つの道。果たして、2nd-Gの人々が、そして佐山が、新庄が選んだ答えとは……。

川上稔が贈る新シリーズ。第２話スタート！

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 2【上】

著●川上稔
イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

電撃文庫

か-5-18
AHEADシリーズ
終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉
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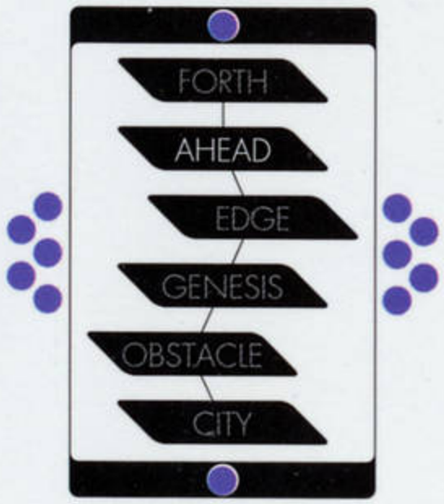

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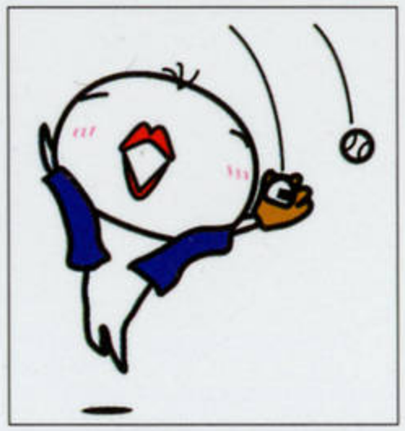

川上　稔（かわかみ　みのる）

1975年1月3日生まれ、東京出身。幾つも抱えた原稿締切をクリアし、第3話（シリーズ5作、6作）を書くために、岡山県へ一泊二日の強行軍で取材旅行を敢行。身体は大丈夫なのだろうかと担当を心配させている。

【電撃文庫作品】

都市シリーズ

パンツァーポリス1935

エアリアルシティ

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蠱楽都市OSAKA〈上〉〈下〉

閉鎖都市　巴里〈上〉〈下〉

機甲都市　伯林1～5

電詞都市DT〈上〉〈下〉

AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル①〈上〉〈下〉

終わりのクロニクル②〈上〉

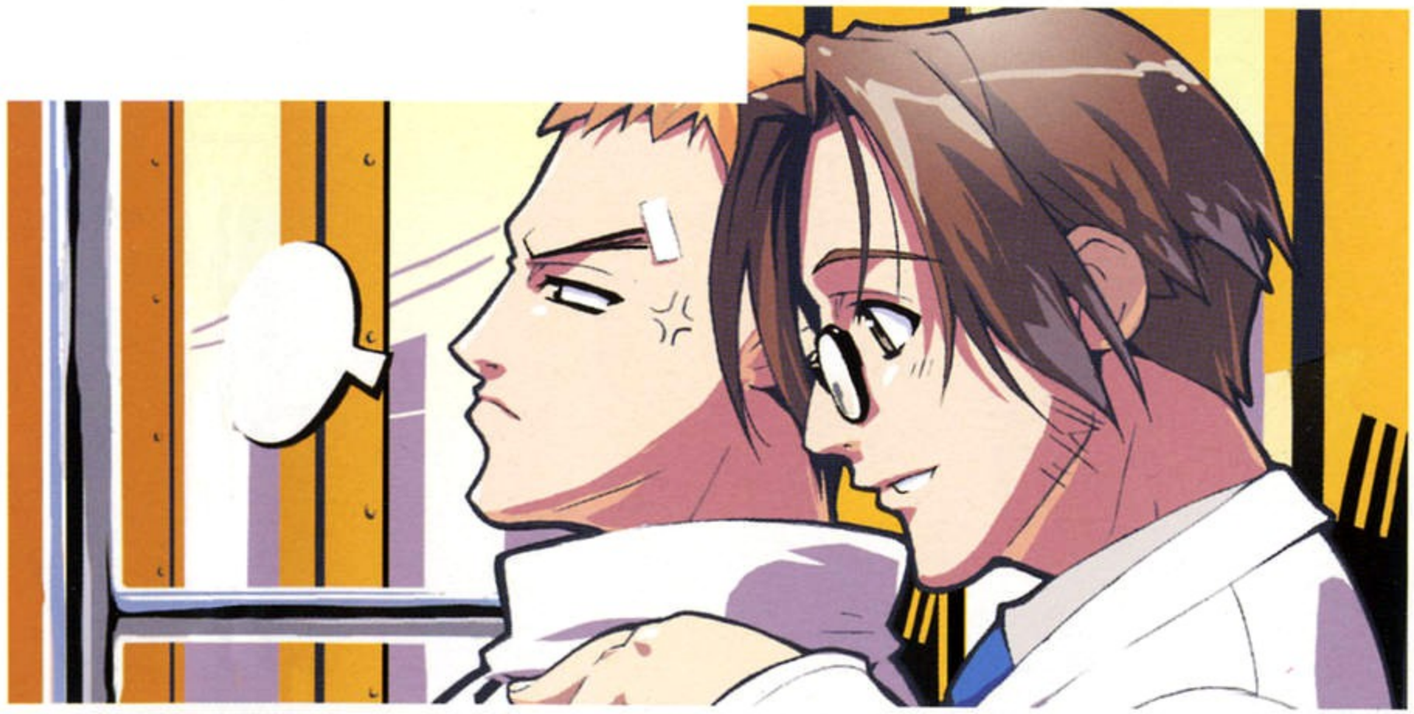
イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）

最近何かあった？「生活が夜型から朝型になりました」ああ成程、悪人は夜動くと言うから改心ですね？「それはどうか」

カバー／旭印刷

The Ending Chronicle

Act.02

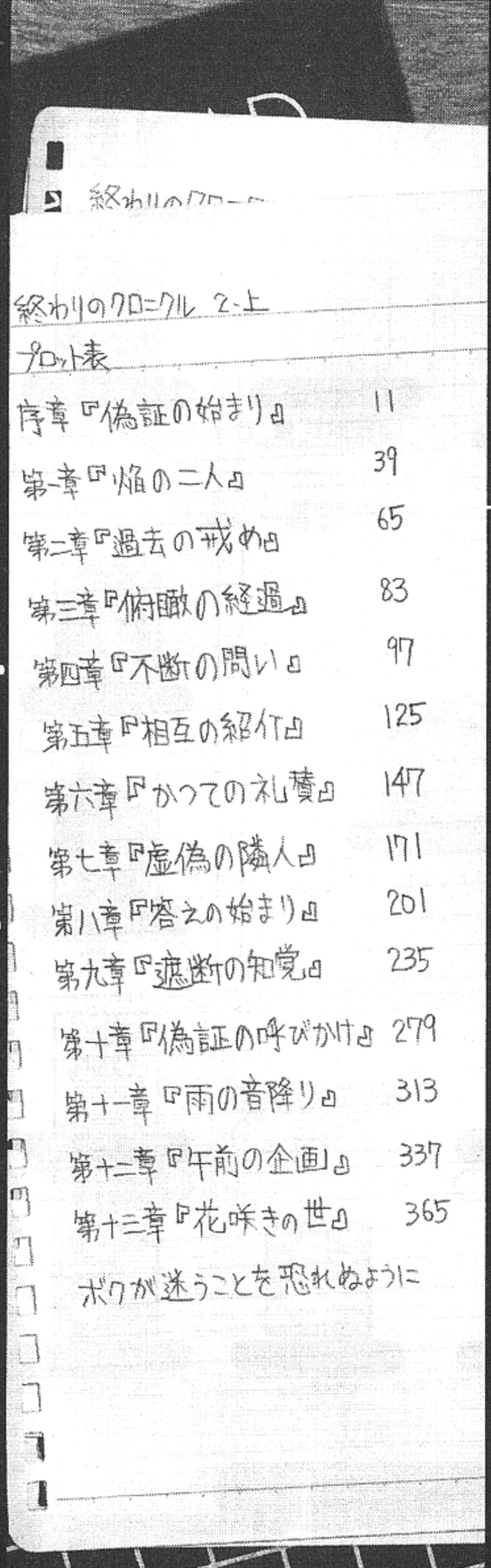


終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

2
【上】

——Gentlemen.
Be aware of the next end.
In order to strengthen your own steps.



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ボクが迷うことを恐れぬように

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

02

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

田宮家

実家代わり

佐山・薫

養父

佐山の両親

既に他界

学校関係

ジークフリート

図書館司書

大樹先生

担任・顧問

元護国課

佐山・御言

生徒会関係

出雲・覚

会長

風見・千里

会計

学生関係

新庄・切

同室

ブレンヒルト

美術部部長

UCAT関係

新庄・運

気になる

大城・至

監督

大城・一夫

困った老人

ボルドマン

連携役

シビュレ

整備役

Sf

至の侍女

Characters

CHARAC

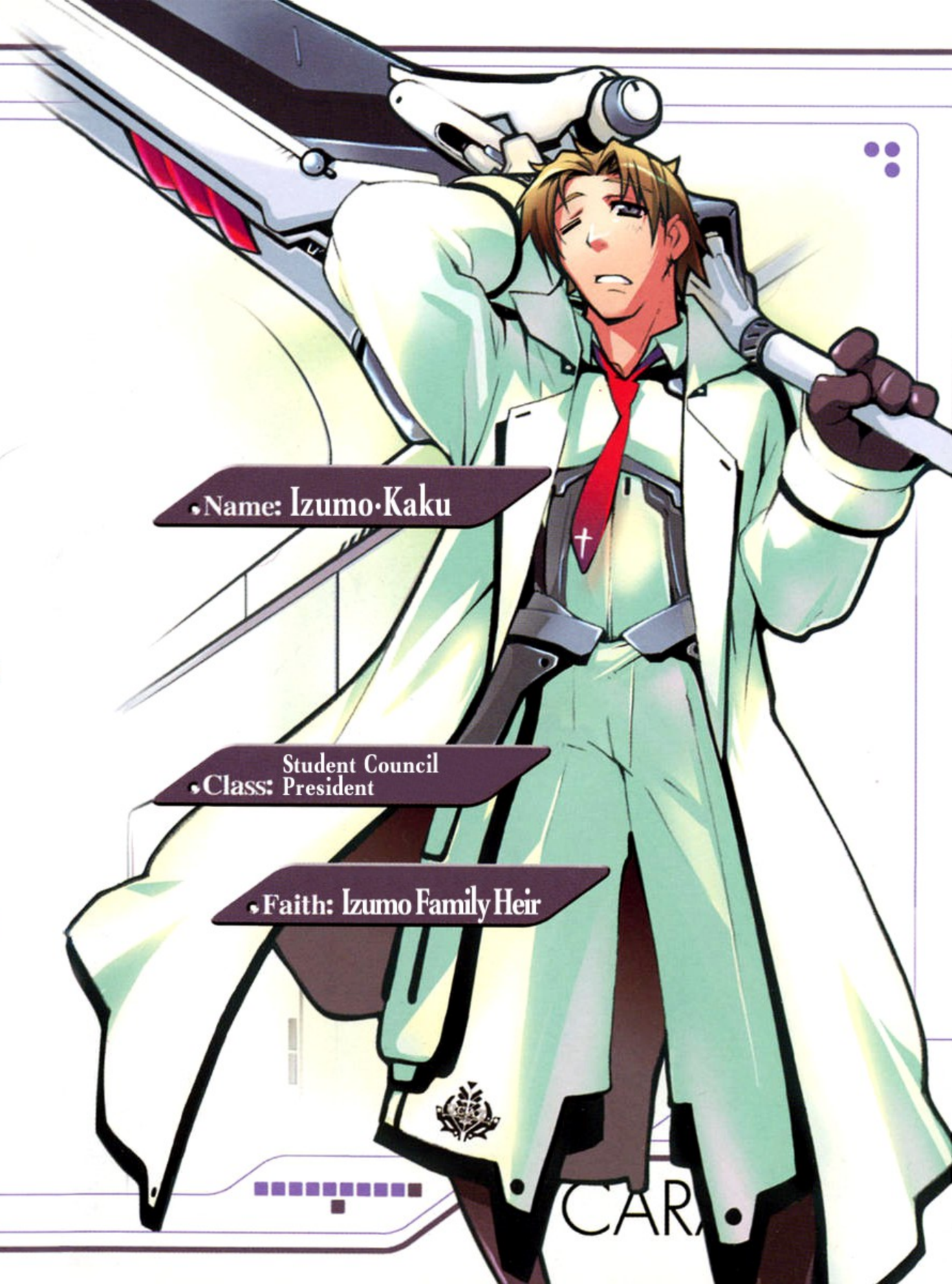
02

•Name: Kazami·Chisato

02
Training room

•Class: Student Council Treasurer

•Faith: Violent Controlling Wife



•Name: Izumo·Kaku

•Class: Student Council President

•Faith: Izumo Family Heir

CAR

Name: Izumo Kaku

Class: Student Council President

Faith: Izumo Family Heir

Name: Kazami Chisato

Class: Student Council Treasurer

Faith: Violent Controlling Wife

G-World

Empty Space

Heavenly Territory

Earthly Territory

Crust Territory

Control system exists here
approx. 6000km underground

Later, the people of 2nd-Gear realized the Concept Core existed and tried to use it.
However, the Concept Core had a name and will of its own. It allowed them to modify it into a control system that could control the world to a high degree, but its will desired respect. Once the Concept Core became a control system, 2nd-Gear became a biosphere.
The name given to the control system allowed it to rule over the entire environment.
The people created a country centered on the manager who spoke with the control system. The people took on positions in accordance with their names and built up prosperity that was integrated into nature.

• About 2nd-Gear •

2nd-Gear is a Gear in which names provide power.
All things have their individual names underneath the Concept Core and nature runs based on those names.
This built up an environment which includes living things.

•Name: Kashima·Natsu

•Name: Baku

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Diagram (top to bottom):

Empty Space

Heavenly Territory

Earthly Territory

Crust Territory

Control system exists here approx. 6000 km underground

Name: Kashima Natsu

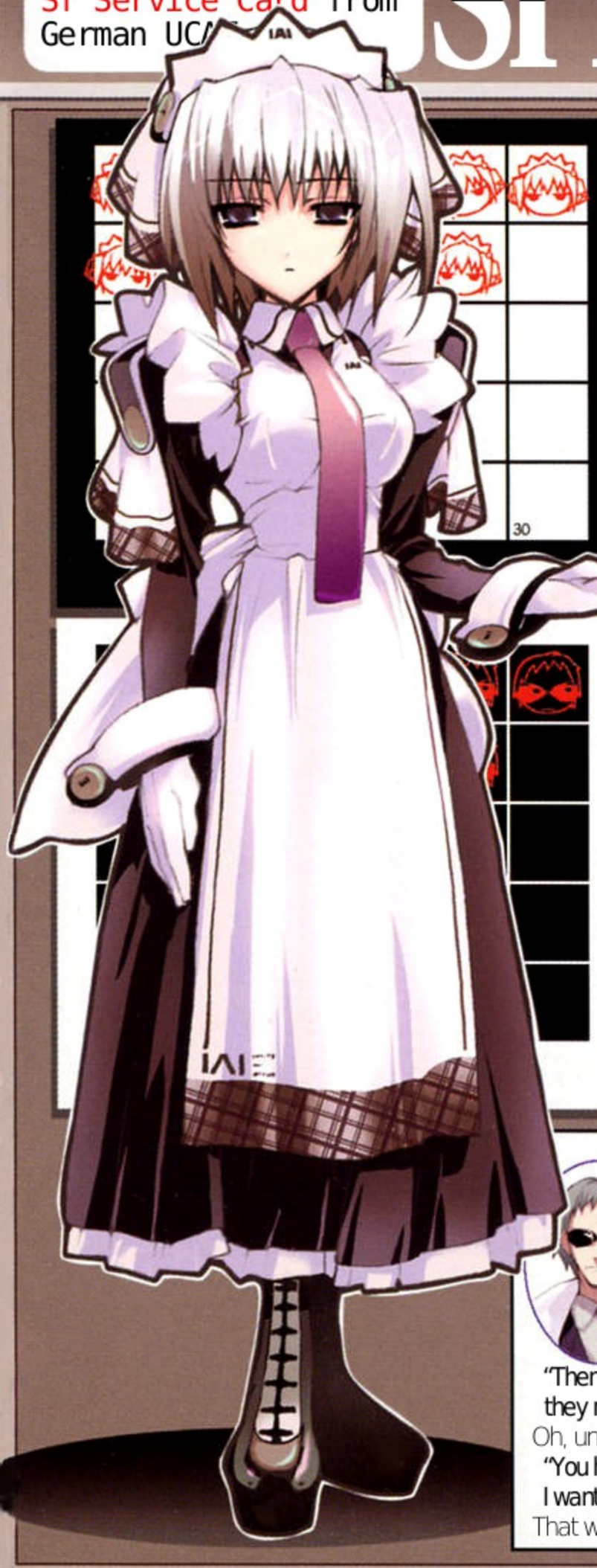
Name: Baku

Sf News

This is a notification about the Sf Service Card from German UC[illegible]

Sf News

#666



The black type for kind pro-German people

- As you gather stamps, you can win the following prizes:
  - : 20 pts = Attend a speech and march
  - : 40 pts = Added sloped armor
  - : 60 pts = Defense along the eastern border
- You have no right to decline.
- If you try to run, she will pursue you.
- The card is not edible.

The white type for that hated SOB

- As you gather stamps, you can win the following prizes:
  - : 573 pts = Option
  - : 765 pts = Learn the Xevi lang.
  - : Max value = God
- Pull off rapid-fire with an "acho!" of your own.
- You must already enter a coin.
- The card is not edible.

Interview With a User

Today, we are speaking with Ooshiro Itaru-san, the supervisor of Team Leviathan.

How have you liked using it?

"So this is why there are so few young people in UCAT lately."

N-no, that isn't the case...

"Then why have people's personalities changed once they return?"

Oh, um, well... Do you have a final statement for us?

"You have all been very supportive of Team Leviathan and I want you to stop it."

That was Ooshiro Itaru-san~.

Top left: This is a notification about the Sf Service Card from German UCAT.

Top: Sf News

Top right: #666

White square: The black type for kind pro-German people

-As you gather stamps, you can win the following prizes:

20 points = Attend a speech and march

40 points = Added sloped armor

60 points = Defense along the eastern border

-You have no right to decline.

-If you try to run, she will pursue you.

-The card is not edible.

Black square: The white type for that hated SOB

-As you gather stamps, you can win the following prizes:

573 points = Option

765 points = Learn the Xevi language

Max value = God

-Pull off rapid-fire with an “acho!” of your own.

-You must already enter a coin.

-The card is not edible.

Bottom square: Interview With a User

Today, we are speaking with Ooshiro Itaru-san, the supervisor of Team Leviathan.

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Prologue: The Beginning of False Testimony

Prologue

“The Beginning of False Testimony”

The beginning contradictorily tells of the end
Where does that wind lead?

The beginning contradictorily tells of the end

Where does that wind lead?

The heavens were filled with the dark colors of night, but no stars could be seen.

This was Tokyo. The moving people shook the air and artificial lights erased the stars from the night sky.

A certain sound was audible in one street of that city.

It was a solid sound. A metal tip was striking the asphalt.

A voice joined the sound.

"Sf, what do you think of Tokyo's Kanda district at night?"

Those words were spoken by a gray-haired man wearing a black suit. He used a metal cane to walk alongside a white-haired maid named Sf.

Sf spun around and looked around the area when she heard his question.

"The sidewalks are filled with people and the roads with cars, but I have determined they are all moving toward the train station."

"Oh? And does a wise automaton such as yourself know why?"

"Tes, I have determined they are hurrying home, Itaru-sama."

"I see," said the gray-haired man with a nod. Sf stopped in front of him. "What is it, you stupid automaton? Are you trying to block your master's path?"

Sf was holding both hands out. Those small hands were holding something.

"What's with that small piece of paper and stamp?"

"To put it simply, this is an 'I did what Itaru-sama wanted' point card. Once I reach 20 points, I can praise myself. I usually stamp it myself, but this is the 20th point. Itaru-sama, you do the honors."

Itaru narrowed his eyes as he took the card and stamp and stamped it.

"What is this weird super deformed face symbol?"

"It is you, Itaru-sama. It was developed by the UCAT development department."

Sf took back the card and bowed.

"Excuse me a moment."

She rubbed her own head with her right palm, lowered her hand, and spoke expressionlessly.

"Tes. I am done."

"Is once enough? You sure are modest."

"If you wish, I can do it any number of times."

"Once is enough. And don't do that in front of people. …Who knows what they would think."

"Tes. I will only do it in front of you, Itaru-sama."

"Oh? Sorry, but I'm a person, too."

"If you say so, Itaru-sama."

Itaru gave no response.

He began walking again. His feet and cane chose a path leaving the road.

He left the people hurrying home along the main road.

"Itaru-sama, doesn't this path lead to…?"

"Yes. You've been here for some adjustments before."

Itaru stopped in front of a large white-walled building taking up a large space in the city.

"Officially, it's known as a hospital, but it's actually Japanese UCAT's Tokyo lab. It works with the Okutama development department. I hear they're improving the anti-3rd god of war."

"Why are we here today?" asked Sf.

Itaru pulled an envelope from his pocket.

"I have to give this to a certain man. He's a descendent of 2nd-Gear which is the basis of Japanese mythology."

"A descendent of 2nd-Gear?"

"Yes. …He holds the name Kashima which is both 2nd-Gear's strongest military god and swordsmith. Tonight, he left UCAT in Okutama and came here."

"Could you not wait until tomorrow and give it to him once he returns to UCAT?"

"In all things, the atmosphere is important. Remember that, Sf."

"Tes. In all things, useless additions are important. I understand."

Itaru returned the envelope to his pocket and walked toward the white building.

Sf followed right behind him.

"But who is this Kashima?"

"Well, this may be a roundabout way to answer…but do you want to hear about 2nd-Gear?"

"No, not really."

"Then I will tell you." Itaru slowed his pace and smiled. "Sixty years ago, 2nd-Gear sided with Izumo Aviation Institute's National Defense Department before any other Gear."

"I have heard of that. Control of 2nd-Gear's Concept Core control system was lost as the Concept War continued and it became the flame dragon Yamata. They signed a treaty and asked that IAI come to their aid."

"Yes, but help did not arrive in time. 2nd-Gear was burned and destroyed by Yamata. …And in '46 after the war ended, Yamata was sealed here in Low-Gear. It was sealed using a giant humanoid machine created by a certain researcher in Low-Gear as well as…" He took a breath. "A sword created by Kashima's grandfather. But …"

"But what?"

"But when it was sealed, the flame dragon Yamata was unable to trust the people of 2nd-Gear who allowed it to lose control. It was sealed based on the trust of a certain Low-Gear researcher. The right to control Yamata should have been passed down by certain people of 2nd-Gear, but Low-Gear stole that right due to Yamata's lack of

trust," explained Itaru with a bitter smile. "But the Low-Gear researcher who spoke the word to seal Yamata was burned to death by the heat of the flame dragon while sealing it."

"So the word used to seal Yamata has not been passed down to anyone?"

"Only the Kashima family knows it."

"Testament. And that is why you are meeting Kashima-sama. Yamata must be controlled when 2nd-Gear's Concept Core is released."

Sf looked forward and Itaru followed suit.

An oden stand was set up on the empty street in front of the white-walled building.

"That oden stand is a UCAT disguise, isn't it? It is the central guard station."

Currently, a single man sat in the chair behind the stand.

He wore glasses, work clothes, and a lab coat. He looked around thirty, had a slender frame, and was facing the laptop placed on the small counter.

As Sf approached him, she narrowed her eyes. Finally, she spoke.

"Tes. I have checked his child string vibration. He is Kashima Akio of Japanese UCAT's development department. His is a senior member. He, his parents, and his grandparents all have pure 2nd-Gear blood. However …"

"However?"

"His physique does not befit the title of strongest military god."

"No, it doesn't," said the man behind the counter as he stood up.

Kashima stood with a relaxed posture and smiled toward Itaru and Sf.

He took a few steps toward them.

“I like it when people don’t think of me as a military god.”

Kashima gave a small bow. Sf lowered her head in place of Itaru, but she frowned.

Kashima tilted his head when he noticed.

“Did a sudden thought come to you?”

“Tes. Kashima-sama, why would you like that I did not compliment you?”

“Because I dislike power. …I dislike my own power.”

“That’s all there is to it, Sf, so don’t question it. He’s a member of the development department. Do you want to cause a split among comrades by unnecessarily finding fault in him?”

“I was not aware you had any comrades, Itaru-sama.”

“Oh? It looks like modern automata naturally reject their master’s personality.”

Kashima suddenly smiled in realization as he listened to the two of them.

"Oh, by any chance are you Supervisor Ooshiro of Team Leviathan? What are you here for?"

"I am here to meet you. Am I interfering with your work? From what I heard, you were on guard duty so you could defeat some persistent attackers while also testing a Cowling Sword."

"Yes. Oddly enough, the research facilities around here have been attacked a lot lately. And by a mysterious group. My friend Atsuta and I have guard duty here, but I arrived a bit early."

Kashima raised his right hand. That hand held the laptop which had been sitting on the counter before.

Itaru looked at the opened LCD monitor.

"Were you killing time by researching Cowling Swords as a bearer of the name Kashima?"

"No, I stopped producing them eight years ago. I was passing the time by watching videos I took of my daughter. She's only four months old, but she's super cute. Look."

As the screen displayed a video of a baby, Itaru grabbed Sf's shoulders and casually pushed her forward.

Sf watched the baby and woman with short hair on the screen.

"I can find no visual match. …Are this woman and child from Low-Gear?"

"She was a classmate during my college years. My wife is Natsu and my daughter is Harumi. Oh, look. Harumi is about to raise her hand. Look, look, look. Ah, she raised it! How cute!"

"Itaru-sama, how should I react to this?"

"Praise him."

"Tes. Kashima-sama, I have determined Harumi-sama did very well."

"Thanks, thanks. …Anyway, what do you need with me?"

"Well, Kashima-kun, it's a simple matter. To put it in a more roundabout way, what do you think of Team Leviathan?"

Kashima gave a troubled smile at that sudden question but answered after a short pause.

"I think it's amazing," he said with a shrug. "You have unfair weapons using Concept Cores, you've gathered skilled people from all over, and you've proven yourselves by getting 1st-Gear to ally with you. I think you've done quite well."

"Then how would you compare us to your own power , Kashima-kun?"

Kashima's smile vanished, but Itaru continued speaking.

"I hear the Cowling Sword you wielded eight years ago could emit power that rivals Izumo's V-Sw."

"That…was destroyed back then," said Kashima expressionlessly.

Sf must have thought something about this change in Kashima's attitude because she took action. She swiftly moved in between Itaru and Kashima.

"I apologize. Kashima-sama, your shoulders have tensed-…"

Sf trailed off because Kashima had placed his hand on Sf's head at some point.

Sf's expressionless face grew even harder. Kashima sighed and nodded.

He rubbed Sf's head.

"Sorry. I have no intention of harming your master."

"Then please stop rubbing my head." Sf pulled a paper card from her pocket and held it out. "If you wish to do so, take this. If my usefulness earns 20 points, you may rub my head."

"Thank you. …Anyway, I hope you understand. I sealed my own power in that accident eight years ago. I

sealed my power to create swords and to wield them. Why are you here, Supervisor Ooshiro? Don't tell me you came here to dig up my past."

"I am happy to tell you that is exactly why I am here. You can be as surprised as you like." Itaru gave a nod and a bitter smile. He pulled the white envelope from his pocket and held it out. "The next negotiations in the Leviathan Road will be with 2nd-Gear. Tsukuyomi, the development department director, said you would be the representative."

"…"

"2nd-Gear has already allied with Low-Gear, so what could you want now? And what could the military god who sealed his own power want? I would like for you to show us that."

Kashima remained perfectly motionless and Itaru bowed his head.

Sf did the same while standing in front of him.

As they bowed, a single voice and the sound of a metal cane rang out into the night.

"For our atonement with the past that the late Sayama wished for, you will take part in the Leviathan Road in search of some answer. That is what we all wish for."

The area that best absorbed the darkness of the night was not the ocean or the city.

It was the forest.

A certain Tokyo forest existed far to the west of the city center. It was located in the area known as Okutama.

Below the moon in the night sky were trees surrounded by darkness.

Just one spot of that dark forest was not filled with shadows. The moonlight reached that spot.

Rows of white-walled buildings could be seen sitting there.

Those buildings were the Tokyo Branch of IAI.

Further back in the valley behind IAI was a single long runway and a white building.

That building was the IAI transportation administration building as well as the headquarters for Japanese UCAT.

The lights were on in that building's lobby.

White light filled that high-ceilinged lobby and a single painting hung on its wall.

The framed oil painting measured two meters square and it showed the Virgin Mary embracing her crying child. Below the painting, six lines of English lyrics were carved into a metal plate.

They made up the English translation of the hymn Silent Night.

Two people sat in the red carpeted lobby below the painting.

One was a black-haired girl. She sat on a sofa while wearing a black T-shirt and a white denim dress. She was speaking to the old man sitting across from her.

The gray-haired old man wore a lab coat and smiled as the girl gestured and smiled while talking.

The girl raised both hands and her smile grew.

"And Sayama-kun is just so amazing, Ooshiro-san. What took me a month in reflexes training he finished in just a week. There are some things he's really weird about, but I think he's mostly an amazing person."

"That is because Mikoto-kun used to train at a really weird dojo called the Hiba Dojo. Shinjou-kun, he should tell you about it eventually. As well as what happened to him."

"Yeah," said Shinjou Sadame as she lowered her hands .

"Where is Mikoto-kun now?" asked Ooshiro to the girl whose cheeks were a bit flushed.

"With starting school this month and working with the student council, he hasn't finished his training time yet. He said he would work at it until late tonight. …He sure has a lot of energy."

Her eyebrows lowered slightly and she looked at the painting on the wall.

Her mouth opened slightly and she muttered the first line of the English lyrics.

Shinjou then lowered her gaze once more.

“It seems Sayama-kun’s left arm is almost fully healed. Will Setsu’s role be over soon? He won’t need Setsu to help him out anymore.” Shinjou’s voice grew quieter. “ Once Setsu leaves Sayama-kun, my lie will be half gone.”

“Are you really okay with Setsu-kun leaving him?”

Shinjou raised her head, looked at Ooshiro with her black eyes, and formed a smile.

“I think it went well. Normally, I…Setsu and I are not allowed out of UCAT. Getting to go to school and be with someone like him may have been more than enough .” She nodded. “Once the Leviathan Road is over, Sayama-kun will have no more reason to be with me. … Once that happens, will I have to stay goodbye to Sayama-kun as well?”

“Well.” Ooshiro folded his arms. “Shinjou-kun. I have a hypothetical question for you.”

"Hm? What is it, Ooshiro-san?"

"What if Sayama-kun said he wanted to remain with you even after the Leviathan Road?"

Shinjou thought for a moment and blushed.

"Th-that would never happen. Sayama-kun is only with me so he can bring out his serious side and face the Leviathan Road. I can't conveniently assume it's anything more. And…"

"And?"

"If I'm always with him, he'll find out about my lie. Sayama-kun is clever. It's dangerous enough as it is. …If he found out about my lie, I think he would start avoiding me."

Shinjou lightly embraced her own body.

She sighed as if to say it was not fair.

"I can only be with Sayama-kun because of my lie. You understand, don't you, Ooshiro-san? You and the others who know the reason behind my lie take such good care of me."

After a while, Ooshiro finally nodded. He let out a deep breath and adjusted his position on the sofa.

As he did, the sound of exhaust could be heard outside the lobby and next to the administration building.

Shinjou and Ooshiro looked out the large window and saw the lights of three vehicles leaving and heading toward IAI.

"Come to think of it, you use those trucks disguised as mobile food stands even at night. What are they heading out for?"

"You know the UCAT Tokyo Laboratory in Kanda, right? They research concept space production devices and update the god of war. Lately, there have been some attempts to get at what's inside there, so we've strengthened the security a bit."

"Security? So was that some special division?"

"No, it was the development division. The 2nd-Gear group said this was a good opportunity to test out a new Cowling Sword. Director Tsukuyomi always helps us so much with our equipment that I can't say no."

"I see. 2nd-Gear adapted well to Japanese UCAT and has already been fully naturalized, right? 2nd-Gear was the basis for Japanese culture after all."

"Yes. They are impossible to tell apart form a normal Japanese person. Some of their older people will occasionally give classes on 2nd-Gear history for the younger ones, but they are otherwise normal citizens of Low-Gear."

"I see," said Shinjou again with a nod.

She looked out the large window which showed her reflection a bit. The lights of the vehicles were no longer visible.

She looked at herself in the window.

She was surprised to find the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

Shinjou tilted her head at her own reflection.

"I hope I can adapt to myself."

In the Kanda district of Tokyo, the stillness of late night surrounded the UCAT Tokyo Laboratory.

This was the time when the city of Tokyo would get some short sleep in the light of the streetlights.

However, a few noises around that white-walled building disturbed that sleep.

There were three noises in all.

The first was the wind rustling through the trees along the road, the second was a high-pitched metallic noise, and the third was a song.

The first was the last traces of the wind signifying the end of spring, the second was the clashing of swords signifying the beginning of a battle, and the third was an out-of-tune male voice.

“Say farewellllll to themmmm! Knock them out with a single punnnnnch!”

As that song filled the air, the wind may have died down, but the sounds of the swords never stopped.

The voice and the noises came from between some buildings located away from the UCAT Tokyo Laboratory.

The song came from a shadow.

This shadow sang as he weaved along the functional street that contained no residences.

A few other shadows charged at the first shadow. They reached him but were blown away.

"As they shed some tearsssss! Say goodbye with three taaaaaps!"

The shadow running on ahead would not fall.

Without lessening his speed, he ran across the road, weaved between the trees, and cut in between buildings.

After a total of seven clashes, seven other shadows collapsed and the chorus came to an end.

Once the shadow finished singing, he ran out from between the buildings and into the street.

He stopped below a streetlight.

The light showed he was a young man wearing the white combat coat of UCAT.

He had short hair dyed blond, slender shoulders, and thin forward-looking eyes.

“I can’t keep this up. I just can’t. I’ve even run out of enka songs. …I need some more fuel.”

As he spoke, he held his right hand up to his shoulder. He wore a black gauntlet to prevent the sword he held from slipping. On the surface of the sword’s white cowling was a black label that said “7STAR”.

He casually held the sword between his right shoulder and neck so he could use both hands to search through his pockets.

As he did, a staticky male voice came from his neck.

“Atsuta. I’m not getting any data from the Cowling Sword. What are you doing?”

The voice came from a small communicator. The young man named Atsuta frowned.

"I was taking a quick nico break."

"Nico break?"

"It means to smoke, Kashima. Y'know, nicotine and all ? I think it sounds more bright and positive than calling it a smoke break.[1]"

"I'll ignore most of that, but no smoking on the job. For the sake of your health, chew some of the nicotine gum in the box I gave you. It will make some people very happy. Me, especially."

"Yeah, you quit smoking after your kid was born. But why are you trying to regulate my health, too? Anyway, come watch my battle and recital. I'm sure you'll find it moving."

"Moving, hm? We do say that when something fills us with emotion. The question is which emotion this would fill me with."

"C'mon, you idiot. This is a hell of a lot more normal than staring at pictures of your wife and kid."

"Staring? You have it all wrong. I am admiring them."

"It's the same thing, you idiot father."

"Ha ha ha. Thanks for the compliment, Atsuta. More importantly, I have something to discuss with you, so accompany me on the train ride home."

"What do you want to discuss?"

"The Leviathan Road. Supervisor Ooshiro went out of his way bring me the paperwork himself. It seems Director Tsukuyomi has given me full authority. To be honest, I'm not sure what to do."

"Yeah, you lost all assertiveness eight years ago."

Atsuta started ignoring Kashima.

But when he pulled his hands from his pockets, he held a long, narrow package of gum.

That nicotine gum had the UCAT symbol on it. The front had a drawing of a smiling man with his eyes opened wide as he ran down a railroad track. The name of the product was "Thomas the Danger Engine Nicotine Gum".

"Kashima, quick question. …What is wrong with your taste for coming up with something like this?"

"The sales just keep rising."

"Are you sure you're not reading the chart wrong? Is it rising as you go to the left?"

"What are you talking about? Do you hate Thomas the Danger Engine that much? …All the kids love him."

"Um, kids don't need to stop smoking. Can't you make some nicotine gum for adults that's filled with sex and violence? Something like Female Teacher Excitement Nicotine Gum."

"Calm down. If I made that, it couldn't be sold in the normal market."

"Are you insane, you naïve father? You're going to sell this gum to the general public?"

"Apparently, it will be sold as an IAI product. The copyright check was strict. Something about the smile needing work."

Without speaking another word, Atsuta switched off his communicator. He grabbed the sword held between his neck and shoulder and looked up into the sky.

"I need to forget that unpleasant conversation."

He began chewing the gum.

"Salted salmon flavor. Now I want some rice," he muttered while slowly glancing around.

At some point, Atsuta had been completely surrounded.

Atsuta stood in the center of the illumination of the streetlight and a few different shadows were standing around him.

There were four in all. They were all men wearing long black clothing.

As Atsuta watched, he realized all four of them had altered a portion of their body.

"Ha ha. You've got the armored body modifications from 3rd-Gear. Wouldn't it be better to attach those toys to an automaton instead? …What Gear are you from?"

The men silently took defensive stances, but Atsuta lowered the white sword in his right hand.

"No. That attitude just won't do. It just isn't right. Listen up, you idiots. When I ask you a question, you answer me. Let's try it again. …Are you part of that rumored Army that takes in people from any Gear?"

The only response he got was silence. Atsuta chewed the gum while a smile appeared in his eyes and on his lips.

"You're here to steal the god of war being improved in the UCAT Tokyo Laboratory, right? You bring such a large group to sneak in during the night and this is all that's left to take me on? How boring. You might as well just go ahead and leave."

In the very next moment, Atsuta took action.

He took a casual step to the right.

It was a quick action.

He moved toward the right hand soldier in black who had mechanized both his arms.

The soldier frantically moved his metal arms into a defensive position.

But he did not make it in time.

Atsuta had already made his way close enough.

Immediately afterwards, his Cowling Sword swept by in front of the man's chest.

That was enough to smash his arms like ice.

"_____!"

The soldier in black opened his mouth in a wordless cry and Atsuta pulled a piece of gum from his pocket and shoved it into the man's mouth.

"It's popular with children, you defeated beginner."

Without waiting for the man's opinion of the flavor, Atsuta kicked his unguarded body.

With his arms gone, the soldier in black collapsed and a metallic noise rang out.

But Atsuta did not even look at him. He turned around and watched the remaining three.

“Don’t worry. I won’t kill you. I’d never hear the end of it from Kashima otherwise.”

“Oh?” replied a voice.

It came from the man with two false arms who stood in the center of three standing ten meters away.

“I had heard there was an insane warrior in UCAT. He comes from the sword god family of 2nd-Gear which is the basis for Japanese mythology. His family name is Atsuta and his given name is Yukihito.”

“I’m surprised you know that. You sound like a sensible person.”

“What are you saying? You are the descendent of the gutless Gear that surrendered to UCAT before any other Gear!”

"Shut up. You're gonna bring up something from 60 years ago that not even my dad was around for? That won't do. It just isn't right. …And what do you mean we surrendered, you idiot? Listen," began Atsuta. "The culture here in Japan with its occasional sexiness and violence is based on 2nd-Gear. Our ancestors didn't surrender. They compassionately descended before the primitive natives here, you complete idiot."

His words and tone erased all expression from the three soldiers' faces.

But one breath later, the man from before spoke again.

"Then we can assume 2nd-Gear will cooperate with the Leviathan Road? The holy sword Totsuka that sealed Yamata is held by UCAT along with the giant humanoid machine Susaou. So will you also…"

"Ally ourselves with UCAT in the Leviathan Road?" asked Atsuta. "I don't know. We've gotten used to this country in the sixty years since the war, but Low-Gear doesn't know the truth about us."

"The truth?"

"The word used to control Yamata. The Low-Gear researcher who sealed Yamata died while sealing it, so it wasn't passed on to Low-Gear. The only person who knows it now is my friend Kashima."

In that case…

"Low-Gear can't control Yamata right now."

Atsuta nodded and looked at the three men.

"Okay, that should be enough. I've talked enough for today. I'll cut you down now."

As Atsuta watched them, his enemies' faces stiffened. One was on the right, one was directly in front, and one was to the left.

"Oh, so you can show some nice expressions. As a reward, I'll show you something neat."

"What?"

"Just watch. If you can."

As soon as he said that, Atsuta began walking. He walked toward the man on the right.

He walked casually and without suppressing his footsteps. However, the man did not react. He only waited for the approach as if he could not see Atsuta.

Atsuta moved up to the man.

Finally, the man panicked. He looked left and right as if he could not see Atsuta who stood right in front of him .

“H-hey, where did that idiot get-…?”

His cry was cut off.

Atsuta had cut him down.

“I won’t kill you. Take your time and enjoy this.”

Atsuta stuffed a piece of gum in the man’s mouth and turned around toward the man who had been on the left.

The exact same thing happened.

As soon as Atsuta turned around, the man on the left lost sight of him.

He checked to the left and right and bent down as if he could not see the man standing directly in front of him.

"Wh-where did-…!?"

His question was cut off.

Atsuta had travelled six steps to the left and cut him down.

Once again, Atsuta stuffed a piece of gum in his mouth .

The men on the left and right had both been unable to react until he had already attacked.

All that remained were the two wrappers Atsuta balled up and tossed aside.

"You can tell your kids about it when you get home. It should be going on sale soon."

With that comment, Atsuta stood before the man who remained in the center. Atsuta's expression was one of complete boredom.

"Now then. Why do you look so pale, you ape? I haven't removed any of your blood. Or did you panic because you think I'm a psychotic murderer or something?"

Atsuta held the Cowling Sword in front of the man's face.

When he saw the white steel point of the sword, he flinched back a bit.

"That technique," he muttered.

"That was 2nd-Gear's Art of Walking. You approach while escaping your opponent's perception and then take their life. There are stories of approaching an enemy to assassinate them in Japanese mythology, right? Anyone well-known in 2nd-Gear can do at least this much."

"You have that much skill and power yet you still serve them?"

"Shut up, you idiot. …The thing is, this woman who's important to me is from Low-Gear. It may just be one person, but, well…she's important to me."

Atsuta smiled bitterly. With that embarrassed smile, he scratched at his head.

"C-c'mon, you idiot. Don't make me say such embarrassing things at a time like this."

With that comment, Atsuta jabbed his knee into the man's gut.

With a loud sound of impact, the mechanical arms and organic body collapsed and stopped moving.

"Ahh, ahh," sighed Atsuta. He looked over the four collapsed figures and said, "Make sure to clean up before you leave. And don't spit your gum out on the road. Got it?"

As if building up
It all slowly begins to move
And hopefully continues to the place it wants to be

As if building up

It all slowly begins to move

And hopefully continues to the place it wants to be

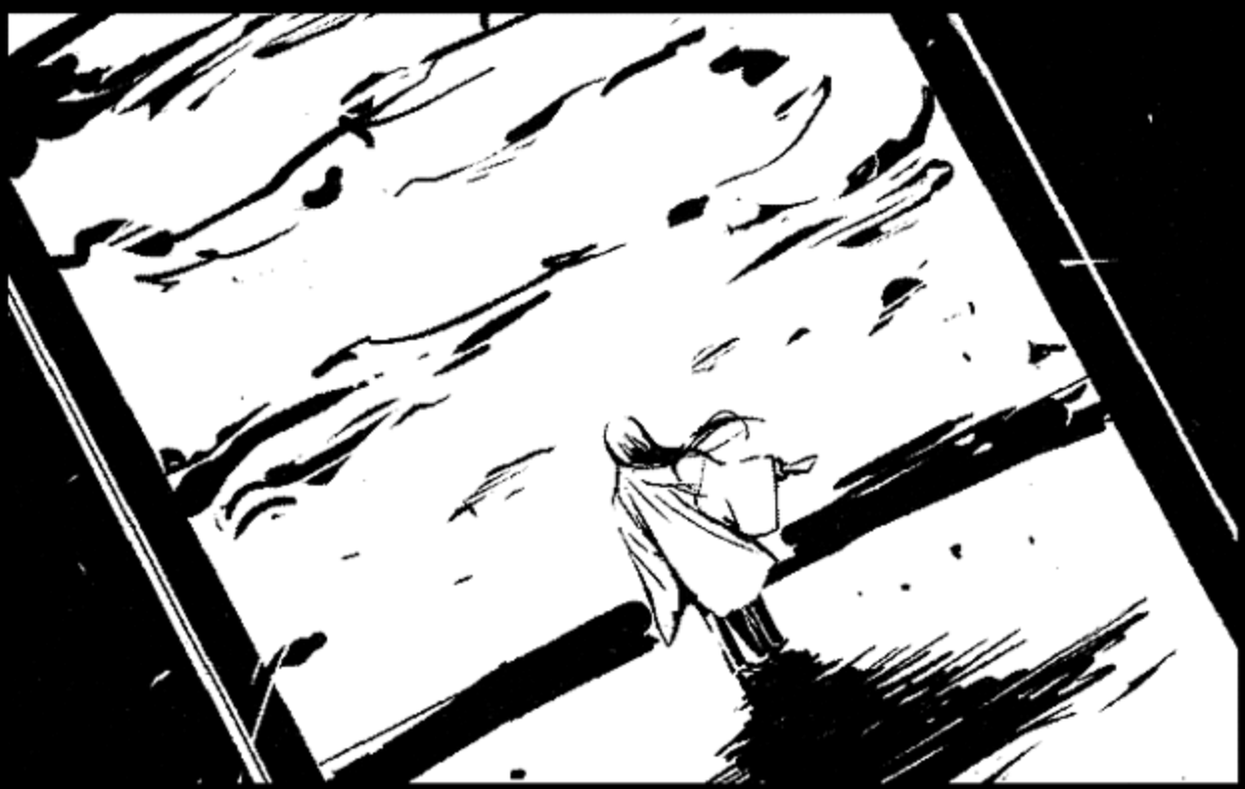
—I cannot ask if I can stay here.

—I decided I would stay here.

Chapter 1: The Two in the Flames

Chapter 1

“The Two in the Flames”



Someone asks something
So what should you do?
You understand nothing and have decided nothing

Someone asks something

So what should you do?

You understand nothing and have decided nothing

Sayama Mikoto was dreaming.

He could see the inside of a giant wooden building. His vision existed in the center of it.

The structure of the building resembled the interior of a Shinto shrine.

However, it was on a much larger scale. The ceiling was easily thirty meters tall and the entrance through which the sky was visible was over fifty meters wide.

…I do not recognize this building. This really must be a dream.

Sayama moved his vision to look at the entrance. The red sky was visible through it. It was a burning and flickering sky.

I am dreaming of a fire, thought Sayama.

Flames and shimmering covered the sky and sparks poured down like rain.

Is this an air-raid? he thought. *No, this is different,* he quickly corrected.

The sound filling the air was not that of airplanes passing by overhead or of fire bombs falling from the sky . It was a bestial roar that resembled distant thunder.

This beast's voice tore at the air.

As that cry reverberated through the air, Sayama saw new movement within the building.

The large gate was being closed from the left and right of the front entrance.

Sayama stared beyond the narrowing gap between the two sides of the gate.

His view below the red sky was from some elevated place. He may have been atop a mountain.

When he looked down on the land, he saw a sea of flames identical to the sky.

Originally, the landscape had likely been made up of fields, forests, a village, and distant mountains, but all of it had been transformed into a field of crimson that rose up in places and lowered in places. Whenever one of the areas sticking up collapsed, more sparks would fly up into the sky.

Sayama suddenly realized a woman stood beyond the closing gate.

The old woman had her back to him. She had black hair and wore a simple white outfit with a yellow cloak over it.

Sayama then saw two men run from behind his vision and toward the entrance.

The man in the lead wore a dirty lab coat. He was a middle-aged man wearing glasses.

He ran toward the closing gate and the woman standing beyond it.

The second man was short and wore a simple black outfit.

He ran after the man in the lab coat.

Sayama saw the man in black catch up to the other man and tackle him to the ground.

As the world outside burned and the bestial roar continued, the two men could be heard falling to the ground.

The man in the lab coat cried out, but not at the man holding him down. He shouted through the closing gate.

"You can't! You're…You're their leader, aren't you!? Why are you choosing death here!?"

The woman standing outside did not turn toward the man. Instead, the man in black answered.

"This is the rule! This is how we do things!"

The man in the lab coat prepared to shout another question, but he stopped.

The man holding him down with his arms and knees had pressed his head down.

As silence fell over the two of them, a voice suddenly came in from beyond the closing gate.

“Military god, take care of him.”

The man in black nodded without saying anything.

As he did, the gate continued to close. Only a meter gap remained.

But the woman’s voice could still be heard.

“Engineer from a country connected to ours in another Gear, these seeds were sown by us. If Yamata devours this world, it will surely make its way through this gate and to your world.”

The man in the lab coat raised his head.

“If…If I had only had more power… If I had made the decision sooner…!”

"Yes," replied the old woman. She continued with a smile in her tone. "Everyone thinks that. Both those who were unable to reach this place and those who did. But just like you, we had no power. …Protect your own Gear ."

And…

"Can you protect your world from destruction?"

The man in the lab coat was unable to answer. He only clenched his teeth while being held down.

As the gate closed, the surrounding walls were dyed in darkness.

"Listen," said the man in black. "The two thousand people we could fit in this temple will be moved to your world. Our glory was once said to be countless, but it has been ruined and lost. And now we will lose our world too!"

"Kh," groaned the man in the lab coat.

His twisted face was turned toward the closing gate. Sayama turned his vision in that direction as well.

That old woman was visible through the slight crack remaining.

She was turned toward the sky and a single flame could be seen in the sliver of sky Sayama could see.

The flame took the form of a dragon. That serpentine flame dragon had eight heads.

It was easily over a kilometer long and continued to stretch out longer.

As it flew through the sky, it turned toward them and opened its eight mouths.

Immediately afterwards, Sayama heard a voice.

It belonged to the woman beyond the gate. She spoke with an intonation to her voice.

“I have-…”

As soon as the rhythm began, the gate closed with a roar.

With the outside light gone, the building filled with darkness. A voice could be heard from outside the gate.

It was a new voice. Compared to the woman's voice from before, this voice was more powerful and caused the surrounding area to shake. It was…

…*The dragon's voice.*

It did not use words.

This was a bestial question. It was a cry filled with an intonation made up of only emotion and intention.

This was the dragon's lamentation.

That cry descending from the heavens was the dragon's voice.

And it held the meaning of a question.

"_____!!"

It asked.

It forced two things upon the listener.

It forced them to answer and to destroy.

The cry pierced through the air in search of an answer and of destruction.

At the same time, everything was overcome with darkness.

In the very next moment, Sayama heard a long cry filled with both sorrow and resentment.

As soon as anguish filled the scream, the images and sounds Sayama was experiencing came to an end.

Sayama awoke.

The early morning air was cold and the newly risen sun was so bright it looked white.

He sat up within his dormitory bed.

However, the remnants of the dream remained vividly in his head, so he still felt a bit removed from reality.

As his sleepy eyes worked to bring his vision into focus, he recalled the dream.

The world had been burned, a lot had been lost, and ultimately he had been forsaken. That was the dream.

…Was that the destruction of another world? Another Gear ?

"That was quite a heavy scene. …But I think I know why I saw it."

Sayama silently reached up to the top of his head. The soft sensation above his head was Baku.

Baku was a four-legged beast with thin fur covering his body. Sayama picked him up and realized his small eyes were closed in sleep.

That animal had undoubtedly been what had shown him the past.

Sayama then reached out to the side.

He would find a book there. It was part of an investigation report written by Kinugasa Tenkyou that collected legends and myths from around the world.

…Baku must have called in the past in response to what I was reading last night.

This was the second volume that detailed Japanese mythology.

That must have been 2nd-Gear being destroyed in that dream, thought Sayama as he gazed up at the ceiling.

But as he reached for the book, his hand touched something warm and soft.

"…Ee."

The sensation was accompanied with a voice.

Wondering what was going on, Sayama looked down. As his vision came into focus, he looked down toward the blanket covering his body.

But he found something else instead.

For some reason, a butt was sticking out sideways there.

Two bare legs kicked at the air near the ladder on his left and a back covered by a shirt could be seen by the wall to his right. A butt with white underwear tightly covering it was located between the two.

"Ah…no…wait…"

As Sayama heard that frantic voice, saw the waving hair, and saw the squirming round skin in front of him, Sayama gave a sleepy comment.

"Why are you suddenly performing such fruity actions , Shinjou-kun?"

"I-it's because you suddenly sat up! And right when I was trying to wake you up."

"I see," muttered Sayama, but his mind was still muddled with sleep. "So I sat up and dragged you in just as you were leaning over the bed."

"Wh-why are you calmly analyzing this so early in the morning!?"

"Then allow me to give a different analysis. …Ohh! Th-that's an ass, Shinjou-kun!"

"Please help me instead of acting crazy!"

"Hm." Sayama watched the butt moving up and down in front of his face. He finally spoke in a gentle but certain tone of voice. "Beautiful."

"Wh-what? Did you just say something kind of weird!?"

"I did nothing more than state the obvious. Anyway, you need to calm down. Here, I will help you up."

"Eh? Ah! N-no, stop. Don't touch my butt!"

"I am not touching it. I am grabbing it!"

"That's the same thing! Please finish waking up before -… Ah, n-no! Don't pull on my underwear! It's riding up!"

"Then what am I supposed to grab in order to help you up?"

"Um…" muttered Shinjou as he turned his head toward Sayama.

Their gazes met while Shinjou was blushing and looking troubled.

"What am I supposed to do?" muttered Shinjou as he stopped kicking his legs wildly.

His legs were now hanging over the edge of the bed and their weight started to drag him off.

"Wah!"

As Shinjou panicked, Sayama caught his waist in both arms.

It all happened in an instant.

Sayama turned Shinjou face up in his arms and sat him up on his lap.

Shinjou kicked his legs meaninglessly two or three times.

"Nn…" he sighed while being held below the arms.

His flushed face was looking up at Sayama.

"S-sorry about causing such a commotion first thing in the morning."

"Do not worry about it. Being woken by another person is one form of happiness."

"Really?"

"I suppose you would not understand as you always wake up before I do. Perhaps we should reverse that at some point."

"Sayama-kun, how would you wake me?"

"Well, if I wanted to be certain, I would perform an early morning body press or lie next to you and give endless flirting comments until you woke up. That would be good, don't you think?"

"No."

Shinjou averted his gaze, sighed, and left Sayama's arms.

As he placed his legs on the ladder, he turned a puzzled look toward Sayama.

"Um… After you wake up, how about we eat breakfast on the cafeteria terrace?"

"Sounds good. I believe the morning menu is tororo soba and a melon soda float."

"Why do they always serve such odd combinations here?"

Shinjou tilted his head as his slender back and waving black hair descended the ladder.

As Sayama watched that back, he realized something. When he picked Shinjou up before, his bandaged left arm had not hurt at all.

…It is almost fully healed.

Once that wound healed, Shinjou would have no reason to remain at the school.

He suddenly found that disappointing and then smiled bitterly.

If he felt that way about it…

…I have accepted Shinjou-kun as someone close to me.

So what would he do if Shinjou did leave?

"_____"

He had exchanged a certain promise with Shinjou Setsu on a certain windy night.

"If you do not wish to be here and I wish to do what is best for you, I will hate you."

Sayama added "as a villain" under his breath and nodded.

He then picked up a thick hardcover book in his right hand and climbed out of his blanket.

After 6:30, the city was filled with light.

The city's transportation system was already moving that early in the morning.

A certain train station was part of the Chuo Line that cut across Tokyo from east to west. An early morning train leaving Tokyo arrived at Ochanomizu Station, the third station from the east.

The train contained few people that early in the morning.

The first car had only two people sitting in it.

They were Kashima and Atsuta on their way back from guard duty.

Kashima put on his glasses and opened his laptop on his lap.

He spoke to Atsuta on his right without turning toward him.

"Atsuta, how can you board the train dressed like that ? You look like a cosplayer."

"Before giving me advice like you're my mother, how about you do something about your abnormal fashion. A lab coat over work clothes? Does your wife never question it at home?"

"Natsu-san is very understanding about my work."

"That's surprising for someone of Low-Gear. …Have you still not told her?"

"No. She still knows nothing about UCAT. Nothing has changed since our college days. She thinks I chose to climb the corporate ladder within IAI."

The young man named Kashima operated the touch panel and a few different programs began running on the screen.

"Ever since I had a kid, I couldn't help but start up a website. Look at this video of her. Look, look. She's about to cry. Ah, she's crying. How cute."

"You're gonna make me cry, you idiot father."

"What do you mean idiot? You can't deny how cute she is. Do I need to say it again? She's so cute."

"That's what makes you an idiot, you idiot. Babies are no different from monkeys."

Kashima gave a toothy smile when he heard that.

"Monkeys? Is that what you said? Is it? But I'm so happy with my life right now that I won't get mad even at that. In fact, I feel sorry that you can't understand how cute she is, Atsuta."

"That's scary. You've lost an important emotion."

"Ha ha ha. Sorry, sorry. I used to laugh at parents like this too, but I went out and bought a video camera as soon as my own kid was born. I really am an idiot."

The train door closed, the train shook once, and it began to move.

Meanwhile, Kashima closed the video on his computer .

"But, Atsuta, you let all of them go, didn't you? What kind of false ally of justice are you?"

"Don't be stupid. A catch and release policy is standard when it comes to villains. Doing anything else leaves you with fewer and fewer people to defeat."

"How did your mother raise you?"

"She told me to always be honest."

"That is an excellent lesson. I'll take that into consideration when teaching my daughter."

Kashima let out a breath.

"Now then," he said as his expression changed. A hint of tension entered his face. "Who were they? They didn't seem to all be from one Gear. It was creepy."

"How should I know? All I saw was a bunch of enemies. Do I need to ask people their name, age, address, and occupation before cutting them down?" Atsuta sighed, stuck a hand in his coat pocket, and stretched his legs out into the passageway. "Are you never going to do anything more than make adjustments to Cowling Swords?"

"That accident eight years ago taught me that making them is not for me. My father makes farm tools and works as a farmer, you know?"

"I always feel bad about all the rice he sends me every year. …But your grandfather was 2nd-Gear's greatest swordsmith, right? Are you still hesitant to directly make something that kills people?"

"I am going to say yes," said Kashima in a flat tone as he stared forward. "I have a certain power, but I have decided not to use it. It's easier this way. …And I won't tell my family either. I'm sure those naturalized from other Gears have similar issues to deal with."

As he spoke, Kashima thought. He finally gave a bitter smile and spoke once more.

"How many times have we had this conversation now ?"

The second floor of the school cafeteria contained only a few students with morning training and was very quiet .

The western style window was open to help circulate the air.

This let in the cold air and the distant noises and shouts of the sports teams' morning training. And…

"I hear hammering and electric guitars."

"They are preparing for the All Holiday Festival, a spring school festival held over the long holiday coming up. You know Kazami, the treasurer, right? She is the one that hits people a lot. She is having a band play at the festival. That is them practicing."

Sayama and Shinjou carried their morning meal trays to seats by the window.

They had placed their things at that table ahead of time.

“Sayama-kun, do you have work today, too?”

Setsu did not know about UCAT, so Sayama had told him he had a part time job at IAI.

Sayama nodded and recalled his dream from that morning.

“Yes. I think there is something I need to do there.”

They arrived at the table as they spoke.

Sayama looked down at something.

A leather bag sat on Shinjou’s side of the table by the window and a pile of loose leaf paper sat on top of the bag.

When they had left their dorm room, Shinjou had quickly snatched that paper up from his desk.

Sayama tilted his head as he looked at the untidy stack of paper.

"N-no! Don't look at it!"

Shinjou frantically ran to his seat and practically threw his tray down.

"Ah," said Shinjou when he realized what he had done , but he covered up the pile of loose leaf paper all the same.

While fixing the position of the tray that was about to fall over, Shinjou looked up at Sayama. The ends of Shinjou's eyebrows were lowered.

"D-did you see?"

"No. I only saw what looked like some kind of title."

"You didn't see anything else?"

Sayama thought back, but he had only seen the text for a split second.

However, he could take a guess as to why Shinjou was so flustered.

"So I was right. You were writing something lewd…"

"No, I wasn't. And what do you mean 'I was right'?"

"I think you have been giving immediate tsukkomi a lot more recently, Shinjou-kun."

"I try not to. Getting caught up in your pace is dangerous."

"But then I feel sad."

"I-I think you should be made to feel sad in this case. C'mon, eat your food and then go take a bath. Look, you can have the cherry from my morning soda float. Look, two cherries. You can't be sad then, right? Right?"

"I bet that would work really well with a young child, " said Sayama as he looked at his soda float with two cherries.

…Well, this might be for the best.

With that serious thought, he placed his tray down. Shinjou's shoulders relaxed and he gave a sigh of relief.

He placed the loose leaf paper in a black binder inside his bag.

Sayama sat down as he watched Shinjou put away the paper.

"Is that what you have been working on late at night and early in the morning recently?" he asked.

Shinjou turned around, averted his gaze, and spoke in a troubled tone.

"…Yes."

"I see. Do your best, but do not force yourself too much. Someone like you needs to look after his health. If you are ever in trouble, come to me. I can introduce you to a good hospital."

"Just out of curiosity, what kind of hospital is it?"

"It is the hospital the Tamiya family uses. Even the biggest coward will return a brave man after spending three hours there. They always grow depressed about three days later, though."

"They're definitely doing something bad there."

Shinjou sighed but soon sat down and leaned back in the chair.

"Sorry."

"What are you apologizing for?"

"Oh, um. I panicked and rejected you just a moment ago."

"No, you did not. That was my fault. I tried to peek at something that belonged to you."

"Yes, but…sorry," he said, but a look of resignation quickly appeared on his face. "Sayama-kun, you do seem crazy at times and suddenly do strange and even criminal things, but you're very strict when it comes to other people and their secrets."

"I have a feeling you have made some kind of misunderstanding about me."

"R-really? But everyone says you are an idiot who lives in the Sayama universe where the world revolves around you."

"Hm, even if I accept everything after it, I have a hard time understanding why someone with grades as good as mine would be called an idiot."

"Um, idiot can mean a lot of different things. …Wait, you're fine with the stuff after it?"

"Oh?" Sayama tilted his head. "You took me seriously, Shinjou-kun? Do not worry. It was a joke. I know the world revolves around the sun."

"A-ah ha ha ha. Th-that's right. You do seem to live in a world of your own sometimes, so I wasn't sure."

"Well, fear not, Shinjou-kun. Ever since the middle ages, the world has followed the heliocentric theory. With me being the sun, of course."

"Eh!? Wh-what? What was that last part?"

"Ha ha ha. A trivial matter, Shinjou-kun. Do not worry about it."

Sayama laughed and suddenly looked out the window .

The student dorms were lined with cherry trees which already had green leaves. In front of them was the parking lot for faculty and visitors.

Sayama saw a woman walking along the gravel of the parking lot.

She had wavy blond hair that was almost silver and she wore a black two piece suit that swelled out at the shoulders.

The hem of her long tight skirt shook back and forth with great regularity because she walked as if treading along a single line.

Just as Sayama started to look away from her, she took a sudden action.

She instantly turned toward him and bent her eyes in a smile.

Their gazes met.

It was as if she had noticed him. Sayama gulped slightly.

She was at least thirty meters away and her back had been turned to him.

Even so, she had turned her blue eyes directly toward him and a slight smile could be seen on her face.

That smile made Sayama frown, but he quickly created a different expression.

He replied to her smile with a calm one of his own.

And she reacted when she saw it.

"_____"

She gave a broad smile. Her slight smile was replied by a look of joy at his response.

With that pleasant smile, she turned back around and walked away.

Not having noticed any of this, Shinjou tilted his head in front of Sayama.

"What is it?"

"A greeting I suppose. Someone wanted to exchange a pleasant smile and I complied."

Something new is beginning, thought Sayama.

A woman wearing a black two-piece suit gave a pleasant sigh as she stood on the gravel below the early morning sun.

"That was a nice response. It would have been cute if he blushed, though. I wonder if he realized who I am."

She smiled and continued walking. She walked along the gravel path in high heels, but produced no footsteps.

The back of the 3rd year general school building was visible ahead of her.

"Now, it's time to go meet Siegfried Zonburg, the librarian of Kinugasa Library," she said with a sigh while observing the shape of the building. "I need to check on the state of Low-Gear."

"It comes down to how we should live here in Low-Gear."

Really, though. How many times have I asked myself that? thought Kashima in the train.

Atsuta spoke quietly while staring up at the ceiling.

"Your problem is how we're a lot like the people of Low-Gear but not exactly like them, isn't it? How about you just take it easy?"

"I used to do that so I could pursue my grandfather's final words. But…I learned something in that accident eight years ago. I started to lose something important to me and could no longer accept my own power."

If he closed his eyes, he could remember it.

It had been a rainy night eight years ago.

He had been producing Cowling Swords at the time.

He had been delighted at a certain sword's quality and had gone out alone to a mountain testing ground near UCAT.

…And I caused an accident.

He remembered the result of his actions and a single emotion all too well.

As he looked down from the mountain that night, he saw the earth collapsing.

As the rain pelted him and he held the hilt of that broken Cowling Sword in his hand, he had run over to the large-scale collapse.

Kashima still remembered the feeling inside him at that moment.

…A sense of superiority.

It had been incomplete, but he head still felt pride in his ability to create such a powerful Cowling Sword.

But Kashima's feelings had frozen over in the next instant.

He had heard a single voice coming from several dozen meters down the slope.

Beyond the uncertain darkness, he had heard a scream.

It had been a scream of fear. And that scream had come from below the collapsed earth where-

"…!"

Kashima's pulse rose abruptly and he opened his eyes.

He felt sweat all over his body and he suddenly realized he was inside the train.

Atsuta was staring at him.

"Are you okay, you idiot? Don't get too lost in the past . It isn't healthy."

"Yeah… But I can't help it."

"If you feel yourself slipping back, start thinking about your wife's breasts."

Kashima obediently thought about them.

"Yeah, they're pretty nice. Can't argue with that."

"Don't start kneading the air inside the train! I only told you to think about them, you idiot!"

"Y-yeah, but to be honest, Natsu-san's chest is really relaxing."

"You want my honest opinion? A military god shouldn't be so sexually lovey-dovey. Anyway, what do you want? You told me to join you on the train because you had something to tell me, right?"

"Oh, right, right. Wait just a second."

The train shook as Kashima spoke.

After several seconds of deceleration, the train arrived at the next station, Yotsuya.

No one boarded. All that entered was the slightly chilly wind of a morning in late spring.

As soon as the doors closed again, Kashima pulled a white envelope from his pocket.

"That Supervisor Ooshiro gave me this. It seems Director Tsukuyomi has given me full authority."

"Let me see that. Is old woman Tsukuyomi just trying to get you out of the way? You said it was about-…"

"The Leviathan Road, yes."

Kashima gave a bitter smile when he saw Atsuta's displeased look.

His friend was displaying his own feelings amazingly well.

…That allows me to act more maturely.

"I was even told to prepare to release 2nd-Gear's concepts."

"Let's see, let's see. This is the document. Um, what does this say? L-L-Levi…"

"Leviathan Road. You can't even read that? I'm a bit shocked."

"Sh-shut up. Reading is a pain, so just explain it to me."

"How I negotiate this is being left entirely up to me. Director Tsukuyomi may be the leader of 2nd-Gear, but she claims she's too busy to do it herself."

"That old woman just wanted to shove this annoyance on someone else."

As they spoke, the train began slowing once more. They were near Shinjuku.

"You're switching to a different train here, right? You'll be coming to UCAT after greeting your wife and kid, won't you?"

"Yes," replied Kashima as he took the envelope back from Atsuta. "But is it really right for us to take care of the Leviathan Road?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

Kashima could not respond right away. He closed his laptop and returned the envelope to his pocket.

…How can I best explain it?

As he thought, the bright platform of Shinjuku Station rushed by outside the window as if to catch them.

"Well, there's that accident for one, but I also have no interest in the Leviathan Road."

"Oh, your grandfather's final words."

"Yes, his final words. He once wielded the sword that sealed Yamata, but his final words became meaningless nine years ago. That was when we inspected Susaou, the giant humanoid machine created to restrain Yamata." He let out a weary sigh. "Releasing 2nd-Gear's concepts means entering the concept space in which those two sleep and releasing the seal of Totsuka to call out Yamata ."

"You make it sound like there's a 'but' coming."

Kashima smiled bitterly.

The train began to stop and noise came from its metal wheels.

While surrounded by that noise and the shaking of the train, Kashima thought. He thought about something he had been thinking for a long time.

"Neither of us experienced the Concept War. Not even Director Tsukuyomi did. In that case, do we…no, do *I* have any right to take control of releasing the concepts?" He took a breath. "I have no grudge against this Gear,

but I am not thankful either. I was born here and living here is completely normal for me. …So how are we supposed to handle this?"

Atsuta frowned at his question.

"C'mon, stop thinking so much about it. Just treat it like a festival. Make it nice and exciting."

"There are times when I'm incredibly jealous of your personality."

"How do you feel about my personality normally?"

"I pity you. I wonder why the world would let a creature like this be born."

"Go to hell. I'll tell your wife her husband looks down on people in his work."

"What a pain," said Kashima as he nodded and stood up. "But that's fine. Natsu-san is very understanding about my work."

"Doesn't that just mean she isn't all that interested in it ?"

Kashima grabbed the pole next to the seat and turned toward Atsuta.

"And I am thankful for it," he said with a smile.

Chapter 2: Lesson from the Past

Chapter 2

“Lesson from the Past”

A driving force is needed to gain something
Is that force desire?
Or is it guilt?

A driving force is needed to gain something

Is that force desire?

Or is it guilt?

Kashima's trip home required riding both the train and the bus.

The yellow train from the Yamanote Line's Takadanobaba Station to the Seibu Line's Tanashi Station took approximately half an hour.

With early morning gone, he left through south entrance of that white-walled station sitting in the morning sun.

Riding the bus heading to Mukoudai Park and getting off near Shakujii River left him almost at his home.

The single-story house sitting in the slightly chilly air with Shakujii River and a small thicket behind it was Kashima's home.

"I guess I'll head to UCAT after getting a bit of sleep."

He stood before a red-roofed house with a metal fence surrounding it.

A tiered platform displaying flowers was visible in the small yard within the fence.

Kashima walked up to the front door, stopped, and sighed. He looked down and fixed his collar.

And he suddenly saw movement in front of him.

The door made a small noise and opened.

A single woman stood within the entrance which looked dim compared to outside.

The first thing Kashima saw was the colors.

He saw the black of her short hair, the white of her shirt, the black of her jeans, and the white of her skin.

Her small black eyes looked at him and smiled in conjunction with her lips.

"Did you hear my footsteps? …You've had a perfect track record on identifying people by their footsteps since our college days, haven't you?"

A smile naturally formed on Kashima's face when he saw her.

"I'm home, Natsu-san," he said with a nod.

"Welcome back, Akio-san."

The woman, Natsu, took a step back and welcomed in the head of the household.

"The night shift must be exhausting. Are you going in again today?"

"After I eat, I'll get some sleep, but then I have to go in . I'm a terrible husband."

"You'll gain weight," said Natsu while closing her eyes in a slight smile.

She gave a small laugh from her nose. This laugh was evidence of her good mood and Kashima found it amusing enough that he smiled a bit.

When he entered the house, he naturally let out a sigh.

"Your own house really is the most relaxing place. … Natsu-san, where's Harumi?"

"Asleep. If you want to see her, do it after your bath. The water is ready, but do you want to eat first?"

"Yes, I'll eat first. …Do I have to change?"

"This isn't your workplace," said Natsu decisively while still smiling. "It's thanks to your job that we have this wonderful house, but that's all the more reason to distance yourself from that job while you're here. …I'm sure Haru-chan would say the same."

"You know I can't win if you bring Harumi into it."

He admitted defeat and decided change out of his work clothes. He settled on changing into a track suit or something.

"Your track suit is next to the dresser. Just wait a second. I'm heating up the miso soup."

Without forgetting to say thanks, Kashima opened the frosted glass sliding door leading from the entranceway to the living room.

The large window looking out to the yard on the left was open and the bright light filling the room seemed to wake him up.

A low table sat in the center of that light.

The dresser was on the right and a bookshelf sat on the left wall between the window and the sliding door to the bedroom.

The television to the left of the entrance was playing the news.

The news was discussing technology.

Kashima had a feeling that sort of news had grown more common lately.

All the recent technological advances may have been a side effect of the activity in the various Gears' positive concepts in order to oppose the negative concepts.

"But reality still isn't that rich."

Kashima began changing with a bitter smile on his face
.

He heard Natsu speaking from the kitchen.

"Come to think of it, some Nappa cabbage arrived from your parents."

"Then we need to take care of what's in the bowl on the table today."

"I'll pickle them, so don't worry. I also used some in the miso soup. The part-timers seem to really like our pickled vegetables. They call it super good and nasty good… Slang these days is really confusing."

Kashima heard a sigh from the kitchen.

"But I feel bad always receiving vegetables from them and never doing anything in return."

"Yes, but my parents do it because they like to. They really like you, Natsu-san. If it was just me, they would never send anything."

"You sound serious, so I won't comment on that. But vegetables are expensive these days. …Do you think they 're just trying to be considerate of me? My parents still haven't…"

"I said they're doing it because they like to, Natsu-san. "

"Okay. But I am thankful. Oh, and I'm thankful for this knife I'm using, too."

"Knife?"

When Natsu-san replied, a hint of confusion had entered her voice.

"Yes, um, this knife I'm using. A blade your father worked on just seems different somehow."

"Well, my dad is wired a bit differently than most people. My mom too, actually."

"I won't deny that, but…um, that isn't what I meant. I can use it without being afraid. Ever since your father gave me this knife when we married, I haven't hurt my

hand with any kind of blade. Not even when using a needle or anything else. …It's like this knife is a protective charm."

It had been altered by a man with the name of the military god Kashima and a philosopher's stone had been added, so that was only natural.

A blade altered by the hands of a god would become a charm and its owner could not be injured by lesser blades.

However, Natsu knew nothing of 2nd-Gear, so Kashima could only play dumb.

"Akio-san, your family really does suit the name of the heavenly god Kashima, doesn't it?"

"My dad would love it if he knew you were comparing him to a god."

"But when I visited your parents' home, there was no connection to the heavenly god. …I researched the great sword of the heavenly god Kashima in college, so I got excited when I heard your father sharpens blades."

Kashima heard a sigh followed by a line he had heard many times.

"It's a lot different from my maiden name."

"I think Takagi is a great name. It means you can reach up to heaven."[2]

Natsu gave no reply.

…Should I not have said that?

As he thought that, Kashima looked toward the bookshelf in front of him.

The top shelf had a sticker labeled “Natsu”. It contained studies on Japanese mythology, all of which were remnants of her college days.

Kashima spotted a nostalgic title among them.

…I was an engineering student, but I attended a seminar on ancient civilization research so I could learn about 2nd-Gear.

He had written a report based on the same book on that shelf.

“And that’s where I met Natsu-san…” he said too quietly for anyone else to hear. “I’m plenty happy now.”

He glanced over to make sure Natsu had not left the kitchen and then removed the book from the shelf.

Two thin books were pressed up against the back panel of the shelf.

They were picture books.

Those worn out antiques told the legend of Susanoo and the legend of Yamato Takeru. The author’s name was…

"Takagi Masamichi."

…Will she ever appreciate that name?

Kashima finished changing, opened the curtain, and sat on the floor.

He heard the sound of clanking ceramics coming from the kitchen.

"Did Atsuta-san not come with you again, today?"

"He's been heading home on the train recently. He doesn't have enough points left on his license. In fact, he said he only has one left."

"I see. …Maybe this is thinking too much into it, but does Atsuta-san ever intend to get married? He hasn't even been coming here recently."

"He has feelings for someone. Apparently, she was a classmate in high school and is the president of a security company now. And he says the reason he hasn't been coming here is that he dislikes babies."

"How childish of him."

"I don't think he's even reached the level of a child. Or a human, for that matter."

"You shouldn't talk about your friend like that."

"That doesn't deny that he's on the level of an ape…"

"R-really?"

With that troubled comment, Natsu entered the room.

The large tray in Natsu's hands contained two teacups, two bowls of miso soup, and two rice bowls.

And the deep platter held…

"It isn't a cabbage roll, but I stuffed some of the Nappa cabbage with the mincemeat left over from last night. You should be able to use chopsticks."

Kashima saw a boiled water soup with two long and slightly pale green bundles inside.

"Did you not eat this morning?"

"I knew you would return, Akio-san. And I already gave Haru-chan milk, so don't worry."

Natsu's eyes narrowed in a small smile and she sat next to him.

"Or did you want to see that?"

"I did," replied Kashima and Natsu blushed a bit.

A restless atmosphere filled the air.

At the same time, the news on the television reached the weather forecast.

According to the weather map, that evening would have…

"Rain? But it's so sunny outside right now."

"I'll hurry home. I can't leave you alone on a rainy night."

Kashima turned to Natsu to find the smile gone from her face.

Her hands remained motionless as she stared at the weather map predicting rain.

She did not move.

Kashima silently removed the fly-net cover from the table.

The slight movement of the air and the whiteness of the fly-net cover caused Natsu to tremble slightly.

“S-sorry.”

She quickly opened the cover of the small bowl and prepared a small plate.

Her expression was back to normal.

“I’m fine. I can even go outside now if I have an umbrella. Anyway, let’s eat.”

The weather map on the television was replaced with rural footage.

It showed a paddy field in the mountains. They were preparing to plant the early-growing rice.

Natsu breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it. She picked up a rice bowl and spoke.

"They really plant rice early these days. Your parents should be beginning soon, too."

"I had enough of helping them last year."

With a weak smile, Natsu held the rice bowl out toward him.

"Thanks," said Kashima as he reached out to take it.

The bowl contained rice from the Okutama farm of the Kashima family. And…

"But I liked having rice we helped make. If possible, I'd like to do that again this year."

As she spoke, Kashima touched the hand holding the bowl.

Natsu's left hand was missing something.

It had no little finger or ring finger.

As noon drew near, Takaakita Academy entered fourth period.

Even though classes were in session, it was also preparation time for the spring school festival known as the All Holiday Festival.

Students excused from class could be seen preparing for battle throughout the school.

From the road to the sports grounds, from the dorms to the cafeteria, and even on the paved and gravel pathways, members of various groups were running around carrying materials or ingredients.

A few people were looking down over all of them.

These people sat on the second floor of the second year general school building's emergency staircase.

Sitting on the landing were Izumo with his coat removed to show off his well-built body through his shirt and Kazami who was spreading out a homemade triple-layer bento on a sheet.

And another girl sat in front of them.

This platinum blonde girl wore her winter uniform below the springtime sun.

Kazami called the name of this girl who had a small bird on her shoulder and a black cat next to her.

“Brunhild, do you have the form for the art club?”

Brunhild handed her a single sheet of paper.

It was the form for the art club’s stand at the festival.

Kazami picked up a binder with a pile of papers inside and compared Brunhild’s paper to an example.

She checked to make sure everything was filled out and stamped.

“The form looks in order, but what’s with this name? Avant-Garde Art Grilled Chicken ‘Cadmium 2005’? Is that toxic?”

“We had a vote and decided on this. It’s amazing.”

“Amazing?”

“Yes.”

"How exactly…?"

"Well, the seasoning is green like this and it's apparently a guaranteed one-hit kill."

"Hey, Chisato. If you ask about this anymore, we'll be caught up in a crime."

Kazami almost fell forward, but she straightened up and Brunhild gave a bitter smile.

"The underclassmen said they would give you a feast if you come by."

"That won't be necessary. …But, Brunhild, isn't it painful to serve grilled chicken while raising a bird?"

"Yes, but we decided by vote. It may be a problem for me as the head of the club, but I plan to stay away from buying supplies and preparing the food. I will only handle the finances."

"That might be difficult. …But grilled chicken tends to make outrageous amounts of money, so I hope you make a good amount."

"You know a lot about this."

"My dad likes this kind of thing. He always has a stand at the neighborhood association festival. He sells them for 50 yen a piece while the cost price is only 20 yen . He makes around 30,000 yen in a day, so he takes it way too seriously and grills and grills like a monkey or something."

"I see. What kind of person is your father, Kazami? Is he like a monkey?"

"He'd be easier to deal with if he was."

"What's with that exasperated sigh?"

"Well, my mom was a Showa era idol who could sing really well but wasn't selling due to being terrible with the business side of things. My dad had known her since their schooldays and he worked as her manager for a while." Kazami gave a bitter smile. "But I've never actually heard my mom sing. It embarrasses her, so she hides all of the photos from back then and changes the channel whenever a show about nostalgic songs comes on."

"Why don't you just watch it while over at my place? You always change the channel yourself."

"I can't just watch something she's trying to hide."

"So that's how it works," said Izumo with a nod.

"I see," said Brunhild as she lowered her head.

Kazami placed Brunhild's form in the binder and changed the subject.

"Anyway, how are things going with 1st-Gear?"

"The reservation is set to be expanded."

"Really? They finally made up their mind?"

"This is still inside information, but it seems a place in German UCAT is being set up to take some of us in. The European UCATs will be taking on some of the maintenance expenses on the condition that we share our techniques with them. They're only accepting second generation members and onwards, but that's plenty."

"I see. A German forest would be a great place for 1st-Gear."

"Unfortunately, I am a first generation member, so I can't go even if I am naturalized."

"Oh, sorry. …I should have kept my mouth shut."

"It's fine. Once the concepts are released to seal the negative concepts, 1st-Gear's concepts will slowly permeate this Gear. Once that happens, we should be freed from the small reservations." She gave a slight smile. "Of course, we'll still have to live in areas where the normal people of this Gear can't find us."

Brunhild's final comment caused Kazami to freeze in place.

Silence fell over them.

Kazami tried to find something to say, but found nothing.

Meanwhile, something lightly struck Kazami's thigh.

It was Brunhild's black cat.

The cat gave a mew, tilted his head, and looked up at her, so she smiled back.

"Were you giving silent consideration?" she asked.

The cat narrowed his eyes and began to climb into her lap.

However, Brunhild wordlessly stopped him.

She grabbed the cat's tail and dragged him away.

"You don't need to feel sorry for me, Kazami."

"Um, no. I wasn't. It's just that the cat-…"

"Forget about the cat. …Anyway, that was just what I thought." Brunhild held the cat up by the tail and smiled slightly. "So let me tell you this: We think our situation has improved. I want you to at least remember that."

"Fasolt is working hard because he thinks so too, right ?"

"Yes, but he seems to be on poor terms with Fafner lately."

"Really?"

"Yes," said Brunhild with a nod. Her tone grew thoughtful. "Half-dragon fights are a sight to behold.

Their shells are really hard, so no normal attack is going to do any damage."

"Um…Brunhild? I thought this was a fight between father and son. Why are we talking about 'doing damage '?"

"Oh? Isn't that normal?"

"Chisato, I think 1st-Gear might be your kind of place. "

"What do you mean by that!? Take this! And this! And this!"

"Yes, Kazami. I think that's about normal."

"I don't think so. Ow, ow, ow. My arm isn't supposed to bend like that!"

Brunhild smiled bitterly as she heard Izumo scream.

She had a small bird on her shoulder and a cat dangling upside down from her hand.

As soon as she stood up, a chime rang, indicating the end of fourth period.

"Lunch break… After stopping by the library, I will go help build the stand."

"Do all of your club's members have class excuses?"

"Yes, but you need to put more effort into making them. They would be ridiculously easy to counterfeit."

"Th-that's the special right given to those smart enough to come up with the idea," said Izumo while trapped in a double arm lock.

Brunhild gave a small laugh and reached for the emergency exit door next to him.

"I hope you can stay that calm as you work on the next Leviathan Road," she said.

At the same time, a boy entered through the door she had opened.

It was Sayama.

He swept his left hand up once to brush back his hair and spoke.

"Hm. This is an unusual combination."

"Are you alone? Shinjou Setsu isn't with you?"

Sayama gave a sigh and began speaking in an admonishing tone.

"He is not always with me. I told him I have student council work, so he said he would head on to the cafeteria and buy my lunch as well. I am most grateful."

As he spoke, another figure suddenly appeared behind him.

"Hi! How is everyone doing?"

It was Ooki with a smile filling her face.

"Oh, is everyone here? If only we all had our lunches with us." She nodded. "How about we talk about the next Leviathan Road? Sayama-kun, you're here because you've decided which Gear to do next, right?"

Chapter 3: Progress of Oversight

Chapter 3

“Progress of Oversight”

You have a question but you cannot find the answer
You are only allowed to reach out your hand
And that is why you cannot give up

You have a question but you cannot find the answer

You are only allowed to reach out your hand

And that is why you cannot give up

The Kinugasa Library was as long as four classrooms and as wide as two.

During the lunch break, it was filled with students. In addition to the usual hardcover books, this library contained all sorts of paperbacks.

Old and new books were seen and picked up alike.

However, the students in the library were not looking at their books.

They were all turned toward the counter next to the entrance.

Two people stood there.

The first was a tall old man. He wore a white shirt, a black vest, and black trousers. He was the librarian named Siegfried.

The other was a tall woman. She wore a black suit and had long blonde hair that was almost silver.

Everyone's gaze was turned toward the woman with looks of curiosity and interest.

But she was not looking at them. She had her back to a large whiteboard for messages located behind the counter and her smiling blue eyes were turned toward the entirety of the library.

The pale crimson lips below those blue eyes moved slightly.

A quiet voice reached Siegfried at the counter.

"Am I in the way?"

"If you are aware of that, then please leave."

Siegfried used a pen to fill out the paperwork on the counter as he replied.

The two of them spoke quietly enough that no one else could hear.

"Even after all this time, you haven't changed."

"How many decades has it been now?"

"How cruel. It's only been a bit over ten years."

"Either way, this is a territory I know nothing about. Diana, I am not like you."

The woman known as Diana deepened her smile in lieu of a response.

She turned her gaze toward the center of the library where the mythology shelf was located.

"Kinugasa Tenkyou, the Japanese authority on mythology, the founder of this school, and the Japanese man who prompted the beginning of Low-Gear's involvement in the Concept War."

"How knowledgeable of you."

"Hee hee. I am left-handed, so I was thankful for his books. When putting together a report, I could turn the pages with my right hand and write notes with my left."

However, Siegfried did not turn to face Diana.

"Why are you here? I am no longer involved."

"Oh? A sorcerer can't retire. And I heard you fought with 1st-Gear recently."

"That was my atonement with 1st-Gear. I do not care about the other Gears. …What do you want?"

The power contained in that final statement caused Diana to lower her shoulders and sigh.

"I have a warning for you: You need to leave. If you take part in the negotiations to admonish the dragons, you will lose your place in this final remaining Gear too."

"…?"

"Team Leviathan and 1st-Gear can no longer go back."

Siegfried finally turned around. Her expression had not changed; she was still smiling.

"That was all I wanted to say. And I am not the type of woman to repeat myself." She stuck her tongue out a bit and narrowed her eyes as she looked through the library. "Are people reading different books than when I came here?"

"The Resolution Tsujigiri Samurai series is popular right now. When he occasionally fails to resolve something, he cannot stand it and cuts someone down, but I hear that adds a human aspect to it. …What was popular when you were here?"

"Well, I didn't read it, but the bizarre warring states series Exciting Baron-chan."

"We currently have up through Volume 170 of that. It takes up most of the new Bizarre Fancy corner made because there were so many books of that genre. I believe the most recent one is titled Excitement in Navalone."

"So it's made it all the way to World War Two. It was only on Volume 3 or 4 back in my day and that was with the Mongols."

As Diana muttered seriously to herself, she looked back over at the mythology bookshelf.

And she narrowed her eyes.

"One of the books is missing. It's the book on Japanese mythology that corresponds to 2nd-Gear."

"I lent it out yesterday to a boy with the surname Sayama."

Those words brought a bitter smile to Diana's face.

"I see," she muttered. "So that will be the next Leviathan Road… This has gotten interesting."

"What?"

Diana maintained a slight bitter smile as she spoke.

"When they go up against 2nd-Gear, they will face a certain problem. This is a problem we once ran across. … It comes down to the meaning of the word 'negotiation'."

"Do you think this Sayama can overcome that problem ?"

"I don't know. But he was at least the kind of person who can return a smile."

She looked over and saw a small figure at the entrance to the library.

A black cat was lying down next to the door and staring intently at her.

Once she saw it, she opened her mouth and spoke in a cheerful tone.

"That boy began everything with a smile, so how will he face this problem?"

Sayama faced Izumo and the others on the emergency staircase landing and told them of the destruction of a world he had dreamed of.

"I have decided that was 2nd-Gear."

"I see. 2nd-Gear is the world of Japanese mythology."

"Given the Divine States-World Interaction Theory, will the stage this time be the Izu Islands?"

"No, everyone from 2nd-Gear lives in the Okutama region."

Sayama watched Izumo grab some chicken from the multi-layer bento box spread out on the floor.

"How much do you know about 2nd-Gear?"

"Nothing at all. …What about the rest of you?"

"Um… All I know is that it's the Gear where names have power," said Kazami. "What about you, sensei?"

終わりのフローラル

Ooki was quickly consuming the contents of the bento box with a serious expression.

"S-sensei? You don't have to eat it all so seriously. I'll wrap some up for you later, so slow down a bit. And I'm not sure you should eat toast with jam along with stewed meats."

"B-but toast with jam is so delicious," declared Ooki as she turned around.

Sayama nodded in response.

"We know that, so how about joining in the conversation?"

"Y'know, Sayama-kun. As your teacher, I think you should slow down and take things easy in life."

"And who was it eating all of the food without slowing down for a second just now, you starving teacher? …More importantly, please give us an answer. Do you know anything about 2nd-Gear?"

"Hm… I think the development department that creates UCAT's equipment is made up of 2nd-Gear

descendants. I don't know anything about that name thing Kazami-san just mentioned, though."

Sayama thought on what Kazami had said about names having power.

"In other words, naming an object gives it a corresponding power? Is that it?"

Izumo nodded in response.

"Yes. By giving a sword the name of a sword and giving a person the name of a person, they become that thing. For example, if you name a sword the Sword of Warrior's Lightning, the sword does not become lightning; it becomes a sword with the ability to send out lightning attacks."

"So instead of having a normal sword, you name it the Sword of Something-or-Other and it gains that ability," said Sayama as he thought on it. "In that case, can the people of 2nd-Gear use the power of their name as their own ability?"

"Yeah. Apparently, 2nd-Gear was a gigantic biosphere system inhabited by people with those kinds of supernatural powers."

Sayama and Kazami let out impressed ohs and ahs upon hearing the word “biosphere”.

Ooki frantically spoke up next to them.

“Oh, I know about that. I really do.”

“Really? Then tell us about it, Ooki-sensei,” challenged Sayama.

“Well, it’s… How should I put it? It’s…um…um…”

“…”

“Wh-why are you looking at me with so much doubt in your eyes, Sayama-kun!?”

Sayama ignored her. Instead, Kazami patted Ooki’s shoulder with a smile.

“Ooki-sensei. To put it simply, a biosphere is an enclosed world. It can maintain the environment needed for a proper ecosystem. Do you get it now?”

“K-Kazami-san, why are you speaking to me like I’m a child?”

This time, Kazami ignored her.

“Okay, Kaku. Why was a world of people with that kind of power destroyed by the dragon named Yamata?”

“Oh, the control system for the biosphere had a mind of its own and was made from 2nd-Gear’s Concept core. It turned into Yamata.”

Sayama frowned and Kazami’s body visually stiffened a bit.

Izumo scratched at his head in response.

“It seems the control system resisted it to protect the people. The family in charge of it managed to calm it down, but the control system was unable to restrain its output enough to maintain the world. It was similar to a meltdown.”

“In other words, it tried to maintain the world but was unable to hold back and was forced to destroy the world? ”

“Yes. Yamata lost control and became a blazing dragon, so it held a grudge against the people. It had taken on that form and destroyed the people and the

world all because it was an object of protection." He let out an exasperated sigh. "After 2nd-Gear was destroyed, I hear the survivors of 2nd-Gear and UCAT worked together to seal Yamata here in Tokyo."

"I assume when you say 'here in Tokyo' you mean inside a concept space where nothing will leak out even if the 'gate' is opened. But…Yamata, hm? That's from the legend of Susanoo," muttered Sayama. "It was a giant serpent with eight heads and eight tails. In Japanese mythology, Susanoo's strategy was to give it sake and then lop off its heads with the Sword of Totsuka while it slept. When he did, he found the sword named Kusanagi in its body."

"If your dream was legit, it must be huge. How are we supposed to control something like that? We need to give that a lot of thought."

"…So Yamata wasn't killed."

"No. It was only sealed. It's still alive."

Everyone stopped moving when Izumo stated that last word.

And Izumo continued.

"A giant concept space still exists somewhere here in Tokyo…and Yamata is inside."

"Then the first question is where that concept space is."

"Well, they'll probably tell us that if we ask. I'd also like some other information on what happened when it was sealed. Chisato, leave your work to the underclassmen during the afternoon. We should head to UCAT."

"Sure. Let's do some research that might help with the Leviathan Road," said Kazami.

Suddenly, Ooki tilted her head.

"Um, Kazami-san? One question."

"Hm? What is it, Ooki-sensei?"

"Well," she began in a curious tone of voice. "Why do we need to do the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear?"

Sayama instantly understood what Ooki's question meant.

With her head still tilted, Ooki used chopsticks to grab a shiitake.

"Hi hean…"

"Swallow before talking. Yes, chew it nice and slow and swallow. …Okay, what was it?"

"Ah… Right, right, right. I mean, the people of 2nd-Gear work for UCAT's development department making concept weapons and other things. They're our engineering group."

"Yes, your Japanese is just fine. Feel free to continue."

"Right, right. It just bothers me a bit. Um…The people of 2nd-Gear have the same physical abilities and appearance as a Japanese person and most of them are already naturalized, so…"

"So why do we need to do the Leviathan Road now?"

That actually is a good question, thought Sayama.

Why were they digging up the past with people who were already on their side?

Ooki continued speaking.

"If we are going to negotiate with them, I think it might end up being a lot harder than it looks. After all, we have nothing to give 2nd-Gear in exchange."

"We can give them money or land in exchange for-…"

"If people on equal footing do that, do you really think they can stay the way they were before? What if Izumo-kun did something for Kazami-kun and she suddenly gave him money?"

Izumo fell silent.

"Sorry," said Ooki in his direction before turning back to Sayama. The ends of her eyebrows were slightly lowered. "Negotiating poorly could bring discord into the relationship between 2nd-Gear and Low-Gear. Unlike with 1st-Gear, the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear is not meant to resolve something. It's more like…"

Ooki thought.

"More like…"

She thought some more and tapped her forehead with the chopsticks.

"Um, uh… I almost had it… Ahh… ahh…"

"Hey, someone help her out."

"Hm, how about this? It is more like this Leviathan Road is meant to reexamine something."

"Ah! That's it! That's good! Way to go, Sayama-kun. I knew a student of mine would be able to do it. …Hey, why are you ignoring me and staring off in to the sky?"

"Oh, well, I thought I heard something odd is all."

Kazami shrugged from where she sat opposite him.

"At any rate, it's been sixty years since the war. If they're essentially the same as us, most of them won't have experienced the Concept War. As Ooki-sensei said, the negotiations won't be easy."

"So the first question I have to think about is what the meaning of this negotiation is."

Kazami looked up into the sky.

A shadow resembling a black bird moved slowly through the blue sky.

It was an airplane taking off from Yokota Air Base in the neighboring town.

Sayama suddenly realized everyone was looking up at the plane.

Finally, someone let out a sigh.

It was Izumo. He spoke in an exasperated tone of voice .

“This really is something we need to investigate, isn’t it? We need to find out if 2nd-Gear is even willing to talk and why 2nd-Gear gave in to Low-Gear in the past.”

“That’s right, Kaku. If we don’t know what happened with them in the past, we can’t even begin negotiating. … Okay, we’ll head to UCAT this afternoon. What about you, Sayama?”

Ooki raised her head.

"Sayama-kun can't go. He has cleaning duty, so he has to attend his last class of the day."

"What is your last class of the day, Sayama?"

"Ooki-sensei's English class. …And I am in charge of interpreting what she says and ensuring class goes smoothly."

"Oh, I see. So it's her class."

"Yes. Sayama-kun is always so helpful and the other students are kind, too."

"I assume by kind you mean submissive."

"N-no, I don't. They all answer in unison and bring me tea without being asked."

"That's what you call being submissive!!"

Kazami's shout echoed into the distance.

Chapter 4: Constant Questions

Chapter 4

“Constant Questions”

The usual begins again
The usual questions and the usual actions
As well as the usual unusual

The usual begins again

The usual questions and the usual actions

As well as the usual unusual

Partially due to lunchtime having passed, schools naturally grew lively in the afternoon.

With its large grounds and many school buildings, Taka-Akita Academy was no exception.

Class 2-D in the second year general school building was Sayama's class. That class had reached the time for its final homeroom.

However, Ooki had yet to finish her lesson.

"Sorry, everyone. My lessons always take so long."

Everyone immediately nodded and Sayama spoke up from the center of the back row.

"Do not worry. All of us are used to it after last year."

"Really? You're all so great. But, but… The most amazing part was how this class was #1 on the academic test in April. Am I just that good at teaching?"

"You are. Your classes do an excellent job of teaching the students' to learn independently."

"Really?"

"When the teacher oversleeps, forgets her textbook, gets off the train at the wrong station, and cannot read what she herself wrote on the board, the students have no choice but to learn on their own. …You do an excellent job."

"…Is that a compliment?"

"Ha ha ha. If you heard it that way, you must be a very happy person. Congratulations on the happy life to come."

"Yay! It was a compliment if you ignore the details!"

As Ooki smiled, the students all gave her threatening looks.

As she turned her back to hand a printout to another row, Sayama nodded toward her.

This is the kind of person working to save the world, he thought as he watched Ooki.

The others did not know about that frightening fact.

The ones working to save the world had no sense of superiority.

No one else knew what they were doing.

In the same way, no one knew anything about the Concept War fought during World War Two.

Sayama suddenly recalled what Ooki had said earlier that day.

…Why do we need to do the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear ?

What did the people of 2nd-Gear think? Did they feel the same way?

When Izumo had left at lunch time, he had told Sayama to visit UCAT's development department if he wanted to know about 2nd-Gear's concepts and the true circumstances surrounding its people.

When the term Leviathan Road was brought up, would they become allies or enemies?

"Hm."

Sayama folded his arms.

He really did need to visit UCAT after class.

He had yet to complete his scheduled training time for that week, he wanted to meet with the people of 2nd-Gear, he needed to speak with Kazami and Izumo about what they had discovered after going on ahead, and…

…Maybe I can see Shinjou Sadame-kun if I go.

With that thought, he made up his mind.

He would go to UCAT.

And he had to inform someone of this decision.

Shinjou Setsu sat to his right with his long black hair tied back behind him.

Shinjou appeared to have been leaning over his desk to write on some loose leaf papers, but…

…*He is asleep.*

Sayama reached over to tap Shinjou's shoulder in order to wake him.

But just as he did, Shinjou frowned and spoke in his sleep.

"Ah… N-no, Sayama-kun…"

Sayama reflexively pulled out his handheld digital recorder.

Hurry, he thought. *Will I be able to edit it together in time ? I hope I do not overwrite the previous recording.*

Sayama frantically hit the switch and held the recorder out just as Shinjou stood his fingernails up on the desk.

"Don't…Don't you need to heat it up more than that?" Shinjou squirmed. "I-I can't handle s-something that hard!"

"Hm. What is this you cannot handle?"

"Ya…"

"Ya?"

"Yakiniku!"

Just as Shinjou let out that shout, he stood up with enough force to knock his chair backwards and his desk forwards.

His cloth pencil case fell to the ground and a few sheets of loose leaf paper scattered from the desk.

Silent focus turned toward Shinjou.

After a short pause, Sayama spoke up.

"What kind of exciting dream were you having?"

"Eh? Oh…um… You were insisting on the order meat-meat-vegetable-meat-vegetable, but I was saying

vegetable-vegetable-meat-meat-vegetable would be better. Then you tried to force some half-cooked vegetables into… Wait, dream?"

Shinjou glanced around and saw everyone staring at him.

"Ah," he said.

He seemed to have caught on, so Sayama nodded.

"I am just glad you managed to wake up on your own."

"There's no way I can believe you with that digital recorder in your hands! What did you record?"

"Just your running commentary on the yakiniku in your brain. Ha ha ha. But do not worry. I will put it to good use."

"N-no. I have a really, really bad feeling about this, so give it to me."

"C'mon, you two. I'm still trying to teach a class here," said Ooki.

Shinjou blushed but then tilted his head when he glanced over at the clock.

“Huh? Why are you still teaching your class?”

“Ah! I may have been the one to say it, but that was a critical hit!!” Ooki then nodded with a smile and pointed at Shinjou. “At any rate, you shouldn’t oversleep.”

Everyone in the class nodded and spoke.

“How can you say that when you’re late to every class!?”

The afternoon sunlight filled a slanted forest.

This forest was in the mountains that stretched back from the train station in Okutama.

Amid those forested mountains was a curving road continuing from the Oume Highway.

The road followed the natural lines of the mountains and the rivers.

However, the road curved in a V-shape at one point.

The road was turning aside to avoid a single mountain . That mountain was covered in underbrush but had no trees.

It was what remained of a large-scale landslide.

That pile of dirt was one hundred meters wide from north to south and it was two hundred meters long.

Behind it was a small mountain about a hundred meters tall on which the strata of the earth were exposed on the side.

A single person stood at the top of those exposed strata.

It was the young man named Kashima.

He wore his usual work clothes, lab coat, and glasses.

A few white structures were visible beyond the opposite mountain and the forest covering it.

“You can really see IAI on a clear day like this.”

…You can always see it well from here.

He could see the sky well too.

Kashima sat on the grass and looked up into the blue sky.

This was not far from his childhood home. When he looked up into the heavens, he was reminded of a single person.

"I used to play with my grandfather."

His words brought back memories of the past.

…My grandfather…

Kashima's grandfather had survived the Concept War.

He had supposedly been a skilled swordsmith, but he had retired when Kashima was still young. The number of friends who stopped by to visit him had decreased as the years went by and Kashima's father had chosen the path of a farmer despite inheriting the skills of Kashima's grandfather.

His grandfather had often spoken of 2nd-Gear as they sat on the porch.

Kashima had attended a Low-Gear school, so he had not thought his grandfather's stories of a different world were true.

The war his grandfather spoke of was different from Low-Gear's World War Two that Kashima had been taught about.

However, those stories had involved many different people, many different battles, and many different losses.

Swords had been swung, bullets had been fired, and giant ships and dragons had appeared. And amid all that , his grandfather had told him the following.

"When we came to this world, the name Kashima gained the meaning of the greatest military god. It is not as powerful as the emperor, but this name allows us to speak with heaven via tools with blades."

Kashima had thought his grandfather's war stories were nothing but fantasy, but one question had remained .

…He would never tell me how the war ended.

No matter how many times Kashima asked, the old man would only smile and say, “That does not matter.”

He had wondered why it did not matter and why his grandfather’s smile was filled with sorrow.

When he had entered middle school, he had been told he was not from this world and his question had transformed into doubt.

According to his parents, when 2nd-Gear had been destroyed by Yamata, the people had escaped to Low-Gear, created a giant humanoid weapon and a sword, and sealed Yamata.

His grandfather had apparently played an important role in sealing Yamata. He had created the sword used to seal Yamata, which was 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core, and he had helped control the humanoid machine.

All of that was true. He had looked into it once he joined UCAT.

However, his doubt had remained.

For example, when his grandfather was still alive, he had never spelled Kashima using Low-Gear's kanji.

…He never let himself fully adapt to Low-Gear. Did the war ever truly end for him?

Kashima did not know the truth. And the time he had made his way closest to the truth was not during his time in UCAT.

It was on a night thirteen years ago.

"The night my grandfather died."

Kashima closed his eyes and recalled that moment in the past that had marked the beginning of it all for him.

As Kashima's vision grew dark, he found himself in an old wooden house.

He was in his childhood home's living room.

It had a tall ceiling and walls, and the thick pillars and lintels were covered in dark soot. All of the wood had a bit of a tree trunk's curve remaining and the room was lit

by nothing but a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

It was nighttime outside and the night was filled with the harsh wind of winter.

A thin old man lay on a futon placed on the tatami mat floor.

That man was Kashima's grandfather.

His hair had thinned, his face had grown yellow, and his eyes were staring blankly up at the ceiling.

Did I ever hold his hand back then? wondered Kashima.

All he remembered was his parents trying to hold him back from behind.

He remembered them telling him to leave him be and not to bother him. But he remembered one thing the most .

"You are wrong! You don't need to bear your father's sins yourself!"

Those words reminded Kashima of something else.

…Yes, I was holding his hand then.

His grandfather had still been strong enough to squeeze his hand back and he had spoken clearly.

"Akio."

When he had heard his name called, Kashima had brushed aside his parent's hands holding him back. He had then moved up to his grandfather's face.

He did not remember what he had told his grandfather , but he remembered what his grandfather had said in response.

"You can live the same life your father chose."

But…

"But, Akio, if…if you have any questions, go to the Izumo company. There is an organization called UCAT there. And…"

His grandfather had stopped speaking at that point.

But Kashima had not allowed it. He had used his empty hand to grab his grandfather's collar.

"Tell me! What do you want to say!? You've been holding back this whole time, haven't you!? You always told me about your dead friends, but you never told me anything about yourself! I should go to UCAT, right! What should I do there!?"

His question had received a single word in response.

"…Tachikawa."

"Tachikawa?" he had said while holding his grandfather's collar.

The old man had nodded and taken a breath.

"There is an airfield there and a giant-…"

At the time, he had not known what his grandfather was talking about.

"A giant what!? There's…there's something there, right!? I just have to go there, right!?"

"Yes. It is in the front box of the bridge in the head… You need to pass that on."

"To who!? Pass what on to who!?"

The old man had not given a response. He had spoken a different word instead. It had been…

"A name?" Kashima had asked.

His grandfather had not nodded. He had only spoken while taking shallow breaths.

"That is the word to control Yamata. That is the truth of 2nd-Gear."

"!?"

"Take that…and go…"

Kashima had gulped and his grandfather's eyes had moved.

They had turned toward a point in the heavens and they had not focused on Kashima who was looking down at him. He had been looking at something much farther away.

The intensity of his gaze had not wavered as the old man spoke a short sentence.

"Can you forgive me?"

Those were his final words.

The old man's slender body had trembled.

That throb indicated the end. Kashima had felt that final beat through the old man's collar and hand. His own body had trembled in response.

Those were Kashima's memories of that night so long ago.

He may have forgotten some aspects of it, but one doubt would never disappear.

…Had the war truly ended for my grandfather?

With that thought, he opened his eyes and stood up.

The slope of a landslide lay below him.

Kashima's gaze stopped on one point of that expanse of dirt. A color was visible just a bit down from the center of the slope.

That color was white.

It belonged to a piece of painted metal.

A white mid-sized bus had been inextricably buried in the slope while rolled on its side.

Kashima stared at the white bus buried in the landslide and muttered to himself.

“My war has already ended.”

After school, Sayama and Shinjou helped some others clean the classroom.

Once they were finished, they spoke with each other while the others prepared to leave.

Sayama placed his textbook in his bag while Shinjou placed his hands between his legs and hung his head down.

“U-um, Sayama-kun. Sorry about before.”

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

"When I was…um…half-asleep, I said something about a weird dream, didn't I?"

Oh, that, thought Sayama with a bitter mental smile.

"No, I do not think it was all that weird a dream, Shinjou-kun."

"R-really? It wasn't weird?"

Shinjou nodded with a relieved smile and Sayama took his handheld digital recorder from his pocket and switched it on.

"I-I can't handle s-something that hard!"

"Ha ha ha. Do you see anything weird about that?"

"That's plenty weird! C-c'mon! Quit fighting and give me that recorder!"

"Calm down, Shinjou-kun. No one is saying you did anything wrong, are they?"

"W-well, no…"

Shinjou seemed to shrink down.

"There is nothing to worry about. Ooki-sensei's self-destruct stood out a lot more. It is of course possible she purposefully self-destructed to cover for you, but the odds of that are too low for me to calculate."

"Are you trying to trick me?"

"Not at all. I am misrepresenting the facts to give you a more positive viewpoint."

"That's the same thing as tricking me. …Honestly."

"Honestly? Honestly what, Shinjou-kun?"

"Nnn," groaned Shinjou as he raised his hands from between his legs. "Um, about what we were talking about before."

Shinjou grabbed a pile of loose leaf paper from his desk and held it to his chest.

"Do you want to know what I was doing this morning and a bit ago?"

"I do," said Sayama with a nod.

What a complicated person, he thought.

Shinjou had refused that morning and he had caused a disturbance during homeroom. Those two facts led Sayama to one conclusion.

…Did he decide it would be better to just tell me?

"I see. Allow me to prepare my recorder again. … Okay, you may spill the beans now."

"Please stop with this polite interrogation."

"Very well. I would like to hear what you have to say. Can you tell me?"

"Yes. But first tell me this: Sayama-kun, do you read novels?"

"I do."

"For example?"

"Up until summer break last year, I read through every single novel on display in the Kinugasa Library. I target the specific knowledge I should acquire, but I will read any kind of story."

"I see." Shinjou's shoulders relaxed a bit. "Wh-what kind of stories did you like? Ones like Tsujigiri Samurai? "

"That had nothing to make it stand out other than the Tsujigiri. …It was fine as long as you did not take it too seriously."

As he spoke, he gave a bitter smile in his heart.

…*A story worthy of facing and taking seriously.*

He then realized something.

He realized what it was Shinjou wanted to tell him.

Sayama pointed at what Shinjou held in his hands.

"I see. Shinjou-kun, you are trying to write something like that, aren't you?"

Shinjou looked up.

Sayama's almond-shaped eyes looked back at him with no hint of a smile.

Sayama had been exactly right. The loose leaf paper in Shinjou's arms was…

"After reading some stories, I wanted to write one of my own. I thought there had to be something better out there and thought about what I would have done differently. …And those thoughts turned into these papers."

"I see."

Sayama nodded, but Shinjou looked down again.

He looked at Sayama's feet and realized his indoor slippers were surprisingly dirty.

"But I've never seriously tried to write anything before . I feel like I'm lacking something."

"Lacking something? Like what? Common knowledge ? Or maybe composure or objectivity?"

"Sorry, but I need to turn those questions right back at you, Sayama-kun. Anyway, let's move on. I always stop writing before I finish, so I'm afraid the same will happen this time."

"I see." Sayama nodded but finally asked a question. " Shinjou-kun, why are you telling me this now?"

"I thought it would be best to tell you."

"And why is that?"

Shinjou thought about his refusal that morning and what had happened during homeroom.

He felt apologetic and also wanted to ensure there were no misunderstandings. However…

…*Why am I so concerned about misunderstandings?*

As he thought, he spoke without thinking.

"I want you to know more about me…"

What am I saying? he suddenly realized.

His face felt oddly warm.

Shinjou looked up to face Sayama. As he looked at him through his bangs, he could see a smile in his eyes. He nodded and spoke.

"That is what it means to tell a story, Shinjou-kun. Do not forget that stance."

"Eh?"

However, Sayama did not reply to that monosyllabic question. He said something else instead.

"What kind of story are you writing now? Is it a bizarre murder mystery that holds the promise of a wonderful romance?"

"I'm not writing some new genre like that. …Recently, I've been looking into Japanese mythology a bit."

"Oh? What a coincidence. So have I."

"I know. You were reading a mythology book by the man who made this school last night, weren't you?"

"So you noticed. I would like to look into the legends surrounding Susanoo and Yamata no Orochi. Do you have any advice for me?"

Shinjou thought for a bit.

"Hm… Maybe you should focus on swords and heroes."

"Swords and heroes?"

"Yes. Japanese mythology features a few different divine swords. The most well-known one is Kusanagi and the second most well-known one is the Sword of Totsuka that defeated Yamata no Orochi. There are also more minor ones like Futsunomitama. Of those three, Kusanagi is the most important." Shinjou worked to recall the knowledge he had read. "Kusanagi was presented to the head god Amaterasu and for some reason its name changed to the Sword of Murakumo."

And…

"The one to wield the sword during the age of men was Yamato Takeru. He is a hero on the same level as Susanoo. He went by the name Ousu and wished to unify Japan, so he first traveled to Kumaso in Kyushu and got to know Kumaso Takeru. But Yamato Takeru tricked him to pull off a surprise attack."

"He disguised himself as a woman to get close and kill him. Kumaso Takeru called him a hero for defeating him and gave him the name Yamato Takeru. Am I wrong?"

"No. Both of those heroes were very unique people. … Susanoo was rude and violent and the gods hated him, but he was honest to himself. However, Yamato Takeru was different. He was brave and people loved him, but…"

"He lived surrounded by lies."

Shinjou froze in place when he heard that. Finally, he nodded.

…*Lies.*

He looked toward Sayama's left arm.

He still had the bandages around it, but the arm beneath was likely fully healed.

Shinjou would have to leave him before long.

As he thought that, Shinjou spoke without meaning to.

"I would say you are the Susanoo type, Sayama-kun."

"I am honored that you think of me as a god."

Sayama smiled a bit and Shinjou smiled back.

But Shinjou finally opened his mouth again.

The words he spoke were ones that had been on his mind recently.

This had to be the source of the guilt he felt toward Sayama and the desire to have Sayama know more about him.

That thought spilled from his lips in a form that expressed it from a different angle.

"Sayama-kun, what would you do if I was Yamato Takeru?"

School had ended and the cleaning was complete.

The school was partially filled with the afternoon sun and new sounds echoed throughout it.

The sounds were the shouts of practicing sports teams and the bouncing of balls. Other sounds of construction for the All Holiday Festival piled on top of those other sounds.

However, there were a few places in the school where those sounds did not reach.

One of those was the east side of the third year general school building.

The first floor was used to store teaching materials, so people rarely passed by.

A tall woman stood amid the shadow of the school building.

It was Diana wearing her black suit.

She brushed up her hair and turned toward the school building.

A guest slipper box was located at the entrance of the building. Someone was standing next to it.

“Do you need something?” asked a girl.

The girl standing approximately five meters away had gray hair and wore a school uniform. A small blue and black bird stood on her shoulder and at her feet was…

"That's the kitty I saw in the Kinugasa Library."

Diana brought her left hand to her cheek and let out a sigh.

The ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly and she looked at the sharp look in the girl's purple eyes.

"What do you want, Brunhild Schild of 1st-Gear?"

"You know? That simplifies things." Expressionless, the girl loosely folded her arms at her waist. "I heard from the cat. You told Siegfried to stay away from the Leviathan Road, didn't you? I assume you're with UCAT , but what are you thinking?"

Diana smiled bitterly.

"Oh? Why does it bother you so much? You lost to them, didn't you?"

"I did, but I also gained something because of them. If you do anything to-…"

"And what do you hope to do if I harm them, little girl ?"

Still expressionless, Brunhild unfolded her arms.

She held a blue stone in her right hand.

The motion of her hand was gentle yet swift and accurate. The path of the stone wrote words in the air.

"I am not going to be treated like a little girl by someone as young as you."

"Me? Young? I suppose I do look quite young. …But I would prefer you called me Diana. I think we can get along."

Brunhild's response was to send white light rushing from her right hand.

It formed a single link of a chain.

The glowing ellipse was thirty centimeters across and it suddenly flew forward at high speed.

It moved toward Diana's neck.

But just before it bound her slender neck, Diana moved her left hand.

She reached her fingers into her waving hair.

When she pulled her fingers out, she held a narrow rectangle of paper.

"…!"

The glowing chain struck the paper.

A metallic noise rang out and a quick blast of wind burst out.

All that remained was a scorched word on Diana's paper.

"Kette… A girl should not be swinging around something like that. Or is that something you take a liking to after living as long as you have?"

Diana's eyes narrowed and she lightly embraced her own body. A smile remained on her lips all the while.

"I learned one thing today: an idiot will not listen."

"And who is that lesson meant for, Diana?"

"Most likely…"

Her next words were followed by motion.

"The entire world."

Sayama frowned at Shinjou's question. He wondered what he meant.

"What do you mean when you ask what I would do?"

"I mean exactly that. What would you do if I was Yamato Takeru?"

Sayama nodded in response.

He thought for a bit and then patted Shinjou's shoulder with a serious expression.

"How about we go to the hospital? You are worrying me with this talk of a previous life."

"Th-that is definitely not the reaction I was expecting."

"Ha ha ha. Do not worry. I can introduce you to an excellent brain doctor. Everything will be okay. You will only feel a small prick. I can also introduce you to an excellent sanatorium. And I suppose I would be the one to nurse you back to health. A sanitarium in Karuizawa … How poetic… The highlands, the wide-open sky, the silent nights… Ahh, ahh!"

"Stop staring into the distance and imagining some drama."

Shinjou glared at him with half-lidded eyes, but his expression quickly changed to an exasperated one.

"Sorry, though. I suppose that was an odd thing to ask ."

Shinjou gave a troubled smile.

Sayama did in fact understand what Shinjou's sudden question had meant.

Just after Sayama had said that Yamato Takeru lived surrounded by lies, Shinjou had asked if he was the same .

…Does Shinjou-kun have some lie?

He wanted to know how Sayama would react to this lie, so it would not be something trivial.

…The reason he asked me so suddenly must have to do with what he said before.

Shinjou had said he wanted Sayama to know more about him.

And with Sayama's left arm almost healed, they would be parting ways soon.

…Is Shinjou-kun unsure whether he should tell me something before then?

Sayama thought on the word "lie".

He wanted to know what this lie was, but Shinjou only showed him a troubled smile.

If he asked, Shinjou was unlikely to answer.

So Sayama chose his words carefully and spoke.

"Will you listen to one thing, Shinjou-kun? No, I must insist that you listen."

"Eh? Wh-what is this all of a sudden?"

"It seems you have some secret, so if you ever feel like telling me, please do."

A look of surprise filled Shinjou's face.

That expression told Sayama he was right.

And as if to further prove that, Shinjou's expression changed to one of relief.

"Okay. I will."

"But be careful, Shinjou-kun. I am a villain, even when it comes to you. So…"

"I know. No matter how much I tempt you, you mustn 't give in, Sayama-kun. You can only be moved when I get serious and try to tell you something. …Right?"

"Exactly. When that time comes, I will face you as a villain and you will face me based on your own standard ."

Shinjou let out a sigh. It was a sigh of relief.

"I will. …I'm a lot of trouble to deal with, aren't I?"

"You could say the same about me."

Shinjou gave a bitter smile and Sayama did the same. In an attempt to bring an end to that mood, Sayama placed his school documents in his bag.

But he suddenly stopped.

He held an atlas of Japan.

He suddenly opened up a map of Tokyo on the desk.

…Kazami and Izumo are probably gathering information on 2nd-Gear right now.

For example, they might be learning where Yamata was sealed.

Shinjou glanced at the map from the side.

"Is there something in Tokyo?"

"Yes. I am going to be looking for something soon. If there was somewhere in Tokyo where something quite large could freely go on a rampage, where would that be ?"

"Y-you make it sound like a monster movie. I want to say a park, but parks have a lot of trees and hills. Is there anywhere flatter like an airfield?"

"An airfield, hm? I don't think Tokyo has one of those. "

Sayama's comment received a response from a voice by the classroom window.

"There's Yokota Air Base."

Sayama and Shinjou raised their heads and looked to the left.

Someone's back was visible by the window toward the back of the classroom.

A boy with a medium build sat on the window frame with his uniform's coat removed.

The boy had fairly tanned skin, baggy pants, and a shirt with the bottom spread out.

He turned his finely chiseled face and wavy black hair toward them.

“What kind of crazy conversation have you been having?” he asked with his blue eyes hidden by sunglasses.

“It should have been self-explanatory, Harakawa. And what are you doing here?”

“Oh, Ooki-sensei broke this window yesterday, remember? Well, she asked me to fix it.”

“I do remember. She opened the window normally, but it fell out for some reason.”

“Yes, and it stabbed into the flower bed down below. It looked like some kind of avant-garde art. I’m in the automobile club, though, so this isn’t my specialty. Anyway, if you have business at Yokota, I can let you in. I work there part-time.”

“No, I have no business with Yokota Air Base. It would be the airfield from before the war.”

Sayama suddenly spread the atlas out on the desk.

There had been a large airfield in Tokyo before the war .

Sayama quickly opened the enlarged map of western Tokyo and Harakawa called out to him.

“Tachikawa?”

“Yes. It seems your leaving school to work at a military base was useful after all, Dan Harakawa. There used to be a military airfield here in Tokyo: Tachikawa Airfield. It is currently known as the Showa Memorial Park, but it functioned as an airport before the war and… ”

Sayama moved his finger along the map.

A train route ran by Showa Memorial Park.

It was the JR Oume Line which left Tachikawa. The Oume Line extended west toward Okutama. It continued directly to Okutama where UCAT was located.

“I see,” muttered Sayama.

Suddenly, he heard a single noise.

It was a metallic noise.

Harakawa must have dropped a tool, because he looked around at the floor.

An atmosphere of confusion filled the room and Sayama alone began to move. He stood up.

“That was the sound of glass breaking.”

“Wh-what is it, Sayama-kun? What was that about glass?”

“Sorry,” he said as he handed his black leather bag to Shinjou. “Could you take this back to our dorm room? Once I take care of some business, I think I will head directly to work.”

“Some business?” asked Shinjou as he took the black leather bag.

Sayama nodded.

“I need to clean something up.”

Chapter 5: A Mutual Introduction

Chapter 5

“A Mutual Introduction”

The present drives one to question the past
The past prevents one from protecting the answer in the present
Which one gives a more evil impression?

The present drives one to question the past

The past prevents one from protecting the answer in the present

Which one gives a more evil impression?

Brunhild and Diana's battle moved inside the school building.

They clashed on the first floor of the third general school building. More and more of the glass in the hallway shattered.

Two forms slipped between the small shards as they moved.

To the east, Diana wore guest slippers and held her pumps in her right hand.

To the west, Brunhild took action and fired an attack using glowing writing.

In general, Brunhild would attack and Diana would receive it.

However, Brunhild was the one being forced back.

As sunlight from the setting sun filled the little-used hallway, sounds of wind came from the rushing light and splashing sounds came from the shattering writing.

With the bird still on her shoulder and the cat still at her feet, Brunhild sank down and moved forward.

She stared at her opponent and thought.

…What is this woman thinking!?

She could not read her.

Part of her did not particularly care, but she also felt a need to know what her opponent was after.

This woman had told Siegfried to leave the Leviathan Road.

…And she said Team Leviathan and 1st-Gear can no longer go back!

What could they no longer go back from?

She doubted Diana would answer if she asked, especially as someone so closely connected to the Leviathan Road.

Every single person connected to that negotiation was hiding a definite truth and only bringing forward the current facts.

And so Brunhild stepped forward in order to ask.

Two footsteps later and she had reached her opponent.

"…!"

She wrote with the stone in her right hand.

The word she wrote meant "iron pipe".

The produced light formed a two meter long weapon. It was lighter than an iron rod and harder than a wooden staff.

She attacked.

Diana stood directly in front of her. She targeted the tall woman's legs which were covered with gray stockings.

Brunhild moved her knees forward to extend her reach . She swung the center of the iron pipe toward the woman's shin from the right.

And in an instant…

"Oh, dear."

Diana tried to avoid the attack.

She moved away to Brunhild's left. She took a step toward the hallway's window, but Brunhild could reach the wall with the length of the iron pipe. Even if the woman pressed up against the wall…

…She can't avoid it!

In the next moment, Diana took a certain action. She placed her slipper-covered foot on the wall.

"I hope no one is looking in from outside."

She walked up the window and circled around to the ceiling.

"!"

Brunhild straightened up but more due to the woman's movement than due to her avoiding the attack.

Brunhild was surprised.

That fact indicated she was in danger, so Brunhild reflexively jumped back.

She tossed aside the heavy iron pipe made of light and took a giant leap back with the movements of a clockwork doll.

She looked up in time to see the woman standing on the ceiling taking a step forward.

She reached her left hand out toward the iron pipe of light Brunhild had thrown into the air.

"You need to clean up after yourself."

It was absorbed into a piece of paper.

Brunhild landed at the same moment. The bottoms of her feet slid a bit on the wooden tiles of the floor.

"Are you using a philosopher's stone to stick to the ceiling?"

"Yes, I am using a spell to adjust the gravitational attraction a bit."

"How?"

"I don't know. All I know is the spell to draw out the power. I don't know the theory behind it." She gave an upside-down bitter smile. "If you insist on an answer, I suppose I could say this is a spell that this Gear obtained along with a few philosopher's stones back when we first contacted your Gear and gained its culture. This method of drawing out power uses a philospher's stone as a catalyst and writing as the key."

Diana raised her left hand. It held a single pure white piece of paper.

"Some look down on it and call it magic."

"I see. And here I thought clinging to the ceiling was your own special ability. Like a frog or gecko."

Brunhild saw her opponent's smile deepen.

Brunhild lowered her stance and turned so her left side faced forward.

"Show me this magic that is based on our techniques."

She then nodded and held her left hand up. She raised her fingers and beckoned.

"Come at me, Little Diana."

Diana responded by lowering her head a bit while still standing on the ceiling.

"I shall."

And she moved forward.

The battle intensified inside the straight hallway.

It began when Diana dashed across the ceiling.

Her pumps dangled from her right hand and she held a piece of paper in her left hand.

As she lowered her body toward the ceiling, she pressed her left thumbnail into the paper. That caused the color black to appear.

That pressure-sensitive paper was created via philosopher's stone processing.

She continued on to draw a pattern with her thumbnail.

The pattern gave the image of fire, so the paper began to burn.

At the same time, fire was projected from the paper.

It was a flame round.

"Brand!"

At the midpoint between the two of them, the fire transformed into a mass just large enough to reach one's arms around.

It shot directly toward Brunhild.

But just before it struck, she sank down.

With a smile on her lips, she wrote a word in the air.

“Metal plate.”

The flames burst apart in front of Brunhild’s right arm.

The pressure-sensitive paper was ripped to pieces.

The flames had been destroyed by the metal plate made of light that had appeared in Brunhild’s right hand.

Her enemy approached in response.

Diana took a step toward Brunhild and then took another running step.

She reached her left arm around and brushed up the back of her hair.

Diana’s hair spread out in midair.

終わりのクロニクル

White fragments flew from the hair.

They were pieces of paper. Sixteen scraps of paper danced wildly through the air. They all had patterns drawn on them already.

They meant “arrow”.

“Pfeil!”

A total of sixteen sharp points flew through the air. They were of course flying toward Brunhild.

Those metal arrows soared in arcs similar to if they had been thrown.

They moved very quickly.

However, Brunhild only responded in one way.

She smiled bitterly.

And that bitter smile began to form words.

“You only need to give form to the power, but you go a step further and give it a physical form, don’t you?”

"Because our ability is inferior to your Gear's, we had to take it farther than yours. My country is filled with perfectionists. It is most wonderful."

"I see," said Brunhild with a nod.

She wrote something in the air and let the arrows fly toward her.

Sixteen metal screws made of light appeared.

The screws scattered in midair and received the arrowheads with the weight of real metal.

The screws acted autonomously.

Whenever an arrowhead dug into the pile of slotted screws, all of the screws would jump up in midair.

The action wanted from a screw was of course to rotate .

They altered the trajectory of the arrows.

They all twisted around and flew behind Brunhild.

Once the attacks missed, they struck the ceiling or the floor.

Just as Brunhild heard sixteen stabbing sounds, Diana reached a suitable distance as she ran forward.

They were three meters apart. If she took one step forward and reached out, she could grab her opponent by the collar.

However, Diana swung her body instead.

As she twisted her body to the right, her left hand brushed up her hair.

Her hair waved, tubes of paper hidden within came loose, and those papers began to unfurl.

“Is that the only technique you have?” asked Brunhild. “I hope you don’t mind if I crush this repeat trick!”

Brunhild knew she could win.

Diana’s hair rushed by and the papers flew.

Brunhild moved forward to stop Diana's movements.

When she sent out the papers, Diana had brushed her hand through her hair, leaving her body unguarded.

If Brunhild charged in at that moment, she could handle whatever happened.

…I will get an answer from you.

Why did she decide the Leviathan Road was dangerous?

Brunhild advanced.

As she did, she felt something on her stomach.

It was the pain of something hard striking her.

"_____"

It was an iron pipe made of light.

She looked down and saw Diana's right hand was holding a piece of paper instead of her pumps.

The paper contained a single word that meant iron pipe: Eisenrohr.

It was the iron pipe Brunhild had created.

The paper that had absorbed the pipe had moved to Diana's right hand at some point.

And then Brunhild noticed something else.

The papers scattering from Diana's hair had nothing written on them.

"The hair was a feint. …It wasn't a repeat trick, okay?"

Diana smiled and sent weight into Brunhild's gut.

"!"

Brunhild was thrown backwards, iron pipe and all.

Her light body seemed to float up into the air and away from Diana.

…*Why?*

Why was she giving Brunhild distance?

Brunhild landed and the iron pipe made of light fell to the floor. At the same moment, she heard a shout from the black cat at her feet.

"Brunhild! …All around you!"

She looked around and found certain objects stabbed into the four walls, the floor, and the ceiling.

They were Diana's metal arrows that she had deflected earlier.

The metal arrows had a pattern carved into them. That pattern would activate a spell.

"It can't be. You carved the spell into the arrows?"

"Yes. This is a technique only possible once you give the power physical form. Physical arrows can be used as the catalyst for another spell. This is quite impossible for you in 1st-Gear who only give form to your power."

Diana's words caused the sixteen arrows to emit light.

Brunhild's only option was to evade.

But a sudden pain filled her neck.

"!?"

She looked over and saw Diana holding her left hand out toward her.

That hand contained a single piece of white paper that was emitting white smoke. Something was wrapped around Brunhild's neck.

"Kette. You can have that back. And while you are bound, we can have some fun with one of our later-developed spells," said Diana with a smile. "Schlag. Let's put some curl into your hair."

As she spoke, a lightning attack exploded out within the hallway.

Kazami and Izumo had arrived at UCAT's fourth basement.

A woman walked alongside the two of them in that white corridor.

This woman wore the white armored uniform of UCAT with the full assortment of skirt and sleeves. Her long, soft-looking blonde hair was swept back.

"Sibyl, is this your first time in the Second Reference Room, too?"

"Testament, Chisato-sama. Even the department heads are not allowed in without a good reason."

"I'm amazed we got permission. Is the Leviathan Road just that important? Well, I doubt Ooshiro-san would tell us even if we asked," commented Kazami.

Sibyl gave a small smile and nodded with her blue eyes.

"Chisato-sama, why are you investigating 2nd-Gear? Don't you meet the development department often enough for G-Sp2's management and adjustments?"

"Yeah. To put it simply, it's because I know them that well that I want to make sure not to be rude."

When Kazami put together her thoughts with a troubled expression, Sibyl's eyes bent in a smile.

"In that case, wouldn't you want to avoid looking into anything unnecessary? Try thinking about it this way: you simply enjoy learning about people you know and gathering new knowledge."

"Actually, I don't really like researching things…"

"That is a fatal flaw."

"Wah! Did you just cut me off completely!? Come to think of it, am I just an idiot!?"

"P-please calm down, Chisato-sama. My honest opinion slipped out by accident."

"Your honest opinion!?"

"Ahhh, Izumo-sama. C-could you do something about this?"

"Sure. …Chisato! Being an idiot's nothing to get depressed over! You can be like me!"

His last word caused Kazami to send a straight punch in his direction.

"Ahh, that's better. At any rate, I suppose it's all over for you if you just give in. …But today I have Sibyl to help me out. Once we're done here, we're headed to the training room. Training really is easier for me."

As Kazami spoke, the end of the corridor came into view.

There was nothing there. It was a dead end at a white wall. However…

—The truth lies in unseen places.

They heard a voice.

"!"

Red text spelling out the words they had heard ran across the black wristwatches the three of them wore.

Kazami trembled slightly at the light impact she felt from her watch.

At the same moment, the space before them opened up .

A wind whipped up, a burning smell filled the air, and a large amount of smoke filled the area.

Silver hair danced in the pressure of the waves of wind . It was Diana's hair.

Her eyes narrowed as she looked into the smoke-filled wind at the center of the blast, but a smile never left her lips.

…Now, how about that?

"If you made it through that…"

As she spoke, the curtain of smoke waved and opened.

A girl wearing a school uniform stood there. She appeared to be unscathed.

Diana's smile deepened.

"Herrlich!"

Diana looked toward the girl standing in the center of the hallway.

The girl's left hand was on the chain around her neck and her right hand was raised.

She was Brunhild.

The expressionless girl's raised hand showed how she had blocked the lightning.

A metal plate, metal screws, an iron pipe, and a metal chain were all floating around her right hand. They appeared to be enveloping her. They had been able to turn aside the lightning attack and prevent a direct hit because she had given her power the form of "iron".

Only an instantaneous decision remained.

The next battle began. Diana saw it with her eyes and heard it with her ears.

She saw Brunhild's right hand produce writing and heard her lips produce words.

"You are that which strikes the enemy."

In the air beyond Brunhild's fingertips, the metal plate spun and became a frame.

"You are that which targets the enemy."

The iron pipe spun in midair and became a gun barrel.

"You are that which is very hard."

The screws flew through the air and connected the frame to the barrel.

"You are that which obeys me."

The chain disconnected, duplicated itself again and again, and finally attached to the base of the barrel.

Brunhild raised her expressionless head and wrote the final term: smoothbore cannon.

As Diana watched on, the connected parts linked together to produce their proper form.

They created a metal cannon.

The writing of someone from 1st-Gear held the power to control every aspect of its target.

"Was everything you did in preparation to create this?"

"Hmph. Just because you are trying so pathetically hard with your later-developed techniques is no reason for me to hold back with the original techniques. Now, take this siege engine used even before the creation of the Wotan Kingdom."

Brunhild pulled a single paperback novel from her pocket.

She set it in the magazine slot on the bottom of the frame.

A new smile appeared on Diana's lips and she reached into her hair.

Immediately afterwards, Brunhild unhesitatingly pulled the anchor.

Space trembled.

That was how it felt to Kazami and the others as an endlessly large file archive opened up in front of them.

The white ceiling was low and occasional fluorescent lights illuminated the bookshelves below.

All of the bookshelves were cheap ones made from metal frames, but they were filled with a great number of documents.

There were diagrams, reports, memos, contracts, and all kinds of other labels. The bookshelves filled with these documents continued on as far as the three of them could see.

"Wow."

Kazami started to take a step back, but a hand stopped her from behind.

It was Sibyl. She shook her head.

"If you move back, you will return to the normal world."

"I guess we have to do this. …Should we think of this as a concept battle against documents?"

"That mindset would be very like you, Chisato-sama." Sibyl gave a small smile and spoke as she looked at the vast archive. "During the time of the National Defense Department, a large number of underground facilities

were created as concept space experiments. UCAT inherited a lot of those and a few of them…"

"Are only known about by those at the very top, right? There are a lot of rumors about that. They say there are areas even further down than the lowest level. … Anyway, is this one of the places we inherited?"

"Testament. This is apparently based on the first archive created during the National Defense Department days. The documents that still exist in the real world are kept in the Kinugasa Library, so this must be a collection of the knowledge obtained in battle and the knowledge derived from that."

"I see," said Kazami with a nod. She looked around with an impressed look. "So there's a lot of information here that they won't let out without good reason."

"And we're here on the authority of the Leviathan Road."

Izumo stepped forward and tapped on a bookshelf.

The shelf lined with knowledge and memories did not waver under his large hand.

"I think it'll take a while before I can thank Ooshiro-san for giving us permission. Sibyl, help us find the documents related to the destruction of 2nd-Gear. … We need a good grasp of who we're dealing with."

"Testament. I will do my best." Sibyl stepped forward and bowed with a small smile. "Let us gather data on the people of 2nd-Gear who we know so well. It may not be much, but I will assist with my information gathering ability."

"Show yourself, power of majesty!"

That shout was drowned out by an intense sound of destruction piercing through the hallway.

A single change came over Brunhild's spell and Diana's spell at the midpoint between them.

That change was even more destruction.

The two attacks were destroyed by someone.

The annihilation of the two powers produced the great pressure of an explosion.

"…!"

Wind and sparks exploded within the hallway.

First, heat and the pressure of the air rushed out. That was followed by gray smoke and the sound of shattering glass.

As if pushed by the wind, Brunhild and Diana jumped back and their clothes were flipped upwards.

As if facing each other, they both looked at the space between them.

The cannon and papers they had been using were already vanishing.

But what had destroyed their attacks?

As they watched, the smoke rising in the wind began to rotate and disperse.

The destroyer stood in the center.

It was a man.

A tall old man was down on one knee. He was bald, wore a black vest, and the palms of the leather gloves on his hands were pointed toward Brunhild and Diana.

Brunhild frowned when she saw the old man.

"Siegfried…"

"That is enough, you two."

As if in response to his words, the wind died down. However, the two witches remained motionless.

Only one person there moved.

That person walked in from the central lobby. He was a boy wearing his school uniform impeccably.

His swept-back hair had some white on the left and right and his almond-shaped eyes looked at Brunhild, Siegfried, and then Diana.

"Sorry for troubling you, Mr. Zonburg. There was nothing a pacifist such as myself could do."

"I will ignore that obvious lie, Sayama Mikoto, but it is indeed best to leave a job like this to the most suitable person."

"Indeed. But I have one question for all of you: what exactly is going on here?" asked Sayama.

He turned toward Diana and she gave a disappointed sigh.

"I was just about to win, uncle."

"That is my-…"

Before she could say "line", Brunhild trailed off.

"Uncle?" she said instead.

"Yes," confirmed Diana before turning toward Sayama .

She brought her heels together, stood tall, and dropped the smile.

"Testament. I am Diana Zonburg of German UCAT. I was sent here as European UCAT's inspector for Team

Leviathan." She turned to Brunhild. "And as the witness for accepting 1st-Gear into German UCAT."

"I see. So Mr. Zonburg's niece was sent in."

"Hah. You look more like his great-niece."

"That is thanks to my uncle improving his eternal youth techniques. It only prevents me from aging, though. I will not live any longer than normal."

"Either way, you're a little girl to me. …Well? What will you do? I don't care if you are the witness for accepting 1st-Gear. Shall we continue?"

The cat at her feet shook his head as hard as he could, but Brunhild paid him no heed.

She remained expressionless.

"Everyone from 1st-Gear would support me. It is not our way to back away because of your opponent's authority."

Diana smiled once more and shook her head.

"Unfortunately, I will have to back away. …It is highly unlikely, but if I ended up showing you my memories, it would be an insult to the past."

"Coward. But I am relieved. You don't see many women who are willing to keep their promises after they lose."

Both of them gave a small laugh.

Between the two of them, Siegfried stood up with an exasperated look.

"Try to get along for 1st-Gear's sake." He loosened his necktie. "I ask that you put constant effort into that."

Chapter 6: Former Admiration

Chapter 6

“Former Admiration”

The world’s entrance is surprisingly close by
Will you turn around or look upwards?
The easiest boundary to accept is at your feet

The world's entrance is surprisingly close by

Will you turn around or look upwards?

The easiest boundary to accept is at your feet

When Ooshiro Itaru awoke, it was the afternoon.

Instead of his usual private room, he was on the roof of the UCAT building.

He had been sleeping in a cloth reclining chair and a blanket while below a large parasol.

Next to him was an astronomical telescope and…

"Sf, what are you doing with that notebook?"

"Tes. I am recording the heavenly bodies we saw last night."

"Oh? I only remember showing you dark parts of the sky and saying 'Look, dark matter'."

He sat up and noticed Sf was filling the entire notebook page with the color black.

"Wait. Are you saying this was my fault?"

"This was what you wanted, Itaru-sama."

Itaru brushed up his hair and placed a hand on the telescope.

"Wanna look at the stars during the day?"

"Tes. Thank you very much. Now I can use a different color of colored pencil."

"What color are you going to use now?"

"Tes. Only the color blue."

"So you think you can only see the sky, is that it? It's time I taught this ill-tempered German machine that the stars do exist."

Sf tilted her head in response.

"Are you sure you want to talk about the stars?"

"For me at least, they're meaningless. But I have an interest in that kind of thing. Remember that."

"Tes," said Sf with a nod.

"Did anything happen since I fell as asleep last night?" asked Itaru.

"According to the business division, Sayama-sama wishes to meet with the 2nd-Gear representative."

"Ha. They haven't even agreed to a mutual contract and he's already here for a preliminary investigation? Any sign of him coming to me?"

"Tes, none at all. Kazami-sama and Izumo-sama arrived ahead of him and were let inside the Second Reference Room along with Sibyl-sama. I predict he will meet up with them."

"I see," said Itaru with a happy look. "He can dig up the past with his friends and trick himself into thinking he knows everything." He gave a bitter smile. "2nd-Gear is a lot like us, but that means they won't open up to us."

Sayama walked through a corridor in UCAT along with Ooshiro.

He was on his way to a meeting with 2nd-Gear.

He had chosen to carry out the meeting alone because Kazami and the others were focused on inspecting documents.

“Most of the development department is asleep right now because they work through the night and the Leviathan Road representative has yet to arrive? It sounds like I will not be able to meet with them.”

Ooshiro nodded in response as they walked down the corridor.

“I can still introduce you to the director of the development department. And you need to experience 2nd-Gear’s concepts for yourself, don’t you?”

“True.”

They both created a loud footstep as they came to a stop.

They stood before the Standard Division's 1st Armory on UCAT's 2nd basement.

When the automatic door's camera spotted Ooshiro, the door opened.

"Did you see that, Mikoto-kun? I'm a total VIP. You should show me more respect."

"Wow, that's amazing. …Is that enough?"

Ooshiro ignored him and stepped into the darkness before their eyes.

Sayama followed.

He heard a voice.

—Names provide power.

Sayama checked the red text scrolling across the watch on his left wrist.

He stared forward and saw that a dimly-lit storehouse had appeared at some point.

The ceiling emitted a bluish-white light and endless rows of steel shelves were covered in swords.

Countless swords were displayed while affixed to the shelves, scabbard and all.

“Listen. While in here, we gain power simply by having our names.”

“I see. Then what does Sayama give me?”

“Hmm… One theory says the name Sayama refers to a certain territory. Instead of giving you a special ability, it gives you the social status of owning that land. My name of Ooshiro means I am sturdy.[3]”

Ooshiro pulled a box cutter from his pocket.

He pressed it to his wrist and drew a line.

“See? Nothing happened.”

“Oh, now that is a surprise. But I am not sure I like the idea of an organization of which the leader walks around with a knife. Should I report you to the police? Also, old man, there is a flaw in your theory.”

Sayama took the box cutter from Ooshiro.

He immediately traced the blade along his own arm.

"Ahh! Mikoto-kun is going along with the latest fad!"

For some reason, Ooshiro raised his right thumb as he shouted out. Sayama showed him the right arm he had cut.

However, the arm was unharmed. The only mark was the slight redness of pressing something up against it.

"This box cutter is mass produced, so it has no inherent 'name'."

Sayama pulled a pen from his pocket and wrote the word "blade" on the knife blade.

"In 1st-Gear, this would have made it a blade."

He did not hesitate to stab Ooshiro in the gut.

"Wahh! Wh-what are you doing, Mikoto-kun!?"

"Stop shouting. It only cut your clothes. It unfortunately did nothing to what lies within. Do I have

to name it the ‘something-or-other knife’ for it to work? …This restriction is fairly strict.”

As he spoke, someone was staring at him with half-lidded eyes, but it was not Ooshiro.

He received a response from an amused female voice coming from further back in the armory.

“That’s more or less it. …You are a crazy person, bearer of the Leviathan Road.”

The voice held a bitter tone and Ooshiro scratched his head as he looked around.

“Hey, Director Tsukuyomi, could you come out to help us study 2nd-Gear?”

“Sure, but wait a moment. I need to put on some makeup with a young boy present.”

“Why bother?” asked Ooshiro.

As soon as he spoke, the old man flew backwards.

A sound of impact rang out.

What was that? thought Sayama just as he spotted a light.

A bluish-white light had knocked Ooshiro beyond the automatic door.

However, it quickly disappeared.

"What was that?"

"Curious? You have excellent focus. Of course, that could cost you your life someday."

The female voice suddenly came from quite nearby.

Sayama turned to the left and saw someone standing there.

An elderly woman in a lab coat stood in the dim light. Her narrowed eyes were turned toward him.

"You are here out of interest in 2nd-Gear, I take it?" She took a breath. "I am Tsukuyomi Shizuru, director of the development department. I will teach you a thing or two about 2nd-Gear's concepts."

The Second Reference Room was large.

Between two of the gray bookshelves on the white floor, Kazami wandered around with a few bundles of copy paper in her arms.

The sides of the lined up bookshelves gave the subject their documents were classified under.

"And the bookshelves covering the same subject are divided up by year and other subdivisions."

Kazami was currently looking at the employee histories.

That was where she would find the data on the 2nd-Gear members working in UCAT.

The documents on the shelves were the master copies and a copier within the room was used to make copies that could be taken out.

However, some concept seemed to be in effect because some of the documents would have a portion blacked out on the copy.

"The truth lies in unseen places, hm?"

Also, it seemed there was some information they could read but would immediately forget and some they would interpret as entirely different text when they tried to read it.

Supposedly, a man had once snuck in to steal some income and expenditure reports, but when he arrived at home, he realized he had instead printed out 26 chapters' worth of a story featuring a sick younger stepsister.

Kazami guessed that man had been Ooshiro.

"I get the feeling that would actually make more people want to sneak in… Anyway, you can't take anything out at all unless you can alter its string vibration. And we only have permission to take out what we print onto the designated copy paper."

…I wonder if Sayama could find a hole in the concept's rules and take out any information he wanted.

"He probably could…"

She smiled bitterly.

That underclassman of ours can be a bit of thief and he tends to let the ends justify the means, thought Kazami. *But what if Shinjou was with him?*

The Shinjou siblings acted as a stopper for Sayama's eccentric actions.

Sadame had filled that role during the battle with 1st-Gear, but at school, Shinjou Setsu had often acted in Sayama's place and warned or stopped him concerning his speech or actions.

Kazami did not know much about Shinjou.

She had first met Sadame when Team Leviathan had been put together and had first met Setsu during spring break. Before that, she had only heard that there was someone named Shinjou who UCAT was protective of.

The one thing Kazami really did not understand was why Sayama made no effort to look into who those siblings were despite having both by his side.

…He must have some reason and he must be satisfied just having Shinjou with him.

Her relationship with Izumo was similar.

They knew each other's families, but the details about the other's parents were mostly unknowns.

They were okay with not knowing and that might have meant what they already had was enough.

"I don't know, though," muttered Kazami as she thought. "Even if you're fine not knowing about the other, you still want them to know about you. And that desire grows stronger the closer the two of you get."

…And Shinjou's secrets are probably larger than ours.

For those sheltered siblings, the desire had to be even stronger.

"But will Shinjou be able to reveal her secret?"

Kazami just hoped Shinjou would not feel guilty if she continued keeping quiet about this important secret.

As she thought, she heard Sibyl's voice in the distance.

"Chisato-sama."

Kazami shrugged and turned toward the bookshelf.

Unfortunately, she had yet to gather the documents she had been tasked with finding.

…Sibyl is way too fast.

She had no intention of feeling bad about being slower than Sibyl, but it made her stomach ache how Sibyl continued to call out her name.

"Um, uh, Chisato-sama…"

"Yes, yes. Wait just a moment."

That doesn't even buy me a minute, thought Kazami as she looked forward.

The employee histories were lined up before her by department.

She glanced along the filing numbers on the edge of the clear file folders holding the documents and reached for the file she wanted.

But Kazami suddenly noticed a certain fact.

"There's…"

"A missing period, right?"

Kazami turned around when she heard Izumo's voice to her right.

He had a ten centimeter stack of copied documents detailing the development of 2nd-Gear concept weapons, but he tilted his head as he looked at her.

Kazami looked first at the blank spot on the shelf and then at the documents in Izumo's hands.

"There is a blank period…but what's with those documents?"

"Oh, Sibyl helped me gather th-…ow ow! Why would you start kicking me out of the blue?"

"Shut up. Guys who take the easy way out will never be good for anything."

Sibyl's skill was amazing, though.

"She is a master of information. The name Sibyl is based on a goddess, right?"

"Yes, Cybele. I wonder who named her that."

"It was probably someone connected to UCAT, but I couldn't say who."

"Chisato-sama!"

"Oh, sorry. I ran into a distraction, so wait just a bit longer."

"A distraction?"

"A terrible distraction. …Kaku, why do you look so upset?"

Despite Izumo's expression, Sibyl called out again.

"Chisato-sama, how about I help you search?"

Now there's a good idea, thought Kazami. She almost agreed but swallowed the words. *No, no. We asked her to help, so I can't have her help any more than this.*

Sibyl was always bringing tea and snacks during training.

In fact, Kazami had a feeling she would occasionally bring them bentos too. Bentos Kazami had taught her how to make.

…Not good. She's surpassing me and I never noticed until now. What do I do?

"Chisato, you look really conflicted, but some things are easier if you just give in."

"Shut up. That comment settles it."

That's right. I can't rely on her. I need to stubbornly refuse her, she thought.

"I'm on my way," said Sibyl.

Kazami's shoulders drooped and she looked up at the ceiling.

Dammit, she thought as Izumo spoke up next to her.

"Sibyl's the type to not think too much about our feelings. But now you've been dragged into the same world of laziness as me. Wa ha ha! Give in to the laziness beam and just laze around until you die."

"I'll ignore that, but was it the same when she ended up helping you?"

"She walked up next to me and began pulling out all the documents I was after and piled them up with a smile. There was nothing I could do."

"Sibyl really likes helping people, doesn't she?"

"The scary part is how it's like an indiscriminate bombing. Some people hate that kind of thing and there are some things people have to do themselves, so try to drag her away at times like that."

"Sure," said Kazami. "But, Kaku, what's the deal with that blank period?"

"From the few bookshelves I saw, there are some shelves that really are empty. There's nothing but a few abandoned documents remaining. I wonder if there's a Third Reference Room where the really important stuff is -…"

"It was not moved anywhere like that," said Sibyl as she walked up from behind.

Kazami turned around and saw Sibyl circle around a bookshelf while her high heels produced loud footsteps.

"Judging by the maintenance department's concept space facility maintenance records, UCAT has no other concept space of this same type," continued Sibyl. "I looked through most of the shelves and it seems the blank period exists here in the Second Reference Room as well."

"As well?"

"Testament. UCAT has a past that is kept hidden from everyone."

In the dim armory, a scarlet light appeared before Sayama's eyes.

The light came from the sword in Tsukuyomi's hand. The matte black blade was spewing red flames.

She turned toward him with a confident look.

"This is a piece of equipment used by the standard division. It is a Cowling Sword named Hinokagutsuchi. With a philosopher's stone, it can produce high enough heat to cut through metal. In this concept space, its name gives it the ability to shoot out fire."

"Can you control that fire?"

"Someone with the name of a sword god or someone with great skill would likely be able to."

Tsukuyomi showed him the blade. The fire it produced illuminated the name "Ichiroumaru".

"We number them like this so it's still a name."[4]

"That is very thorough. But isn't it inconvenient to call in power using names? Compared to 1st-Gear's writing concept, it seems a lot more restrictive."

"Didn't 1st-Gear's lack of restrictions prevent them from leaving behind many written records?" Tsukuyomi gave a bitter smile and returned the sword to its scabbard. "In 2nd-Gear, the bearer of power was determined properly. The different powers were controlled by those who possessed them and were used

to their fullest when released. 2nd-Gear was a Gear of specialization in skills and ability."

"Then 2nd-Gear's representative for the Leviathan Road is…?"

"Yes, a man with great power. Kashima Akio is 2nd-Gear's greatest military god and swordsmith."

"He will negotiate with me?" asked Sayama before asking another question that floated up in his chest. "Did you make a military god your representative because you expect the Leviathan Road to involve combat?"

"It is a distinct possibility, isn't it?" Tsukuyomi's expression changed. The ends of her eyebrows lowered and she looked up with a troubled expression. "But it may not happen. I just hope he can face the Leviathan Road seriously."

"Does he feel no desire to negotiate because 2nd-Gear is already on the same level as Low-Gear?"

To test the waters, Sayama threw out the question he and the others had raised earlier.

However, Tsukuyomi did not give him an answer.

"Kashima has his reasons. But that is exactly why I chose him. Sayama-kun? Do you have some time?"

"I intend to train with my comrades and exchange information on 2nd-Gear. Afterwards, I plan to tell the old man you knocked outside whether I would begin the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear or not."

"I see. Then there is no need to hurry. But it would be best if you met Kashima soon. If you do, you should be able to face the question you have about 2nd-Gear."

Sayama replied to the slight smile in her voice.

"Director Tsukuyomi, may I ask you one thing about that question?"

"What is it?"

Before he spoke, Sayama thought back once more to what Ooki had said.

"The people of 2nd-Gear are supposedly little different from the people of this world. But what do you think? Have you and the others been fully naturalized to Low-Gear?"

"Well." Tsukuyomi thought for a beat while returning the sword to the shelf. "Those of us who do not know about 2nd-Gear and know nothing of concepts likely have no doubts they belong here. My daughter is like that."

"I see. Are you saying you and the others here are different?"

"Hm, I don't know. Everyone is different. We have a certain power, but we all view that differently. Personally, I have no intention of passing that power on to my daughter, but I still think it is useful."

Tsukuyomi then added another answer to her statement.

And the smile on her lips deepened as she did so.

"How about you learn firsthand just how useful the power of 2nd-Gear's 'names' is?"

Tsukuyomi snapped the fingers of her right hand.

In the next moment, Sayama sensed something coming from overhead.

He looked up and saw light. It was the beam of bluish-white light that had knocked Ooshiro away earlier .

Sayama took a defensive stance against the falling light and he heard Tsukuyomi speak.

"The name Tsukuyomi means to 'read the moon', so it lets me control moonlight. The dim light here is modeled after a moonlit environment, so the light here is my ally. This is the power of the name belonging to 2nd-Gear's former imperial family."

Meanwhile, the light arrived.

Sayama moved on reflex. He moved back to distance himself from Tsukuyomi. However…

"The light…"

The light should have fallen to the floor, but it suddenly bent and curved.

The light shot by across the ground and jumped up toward Sayama's stomach.

Sayama stood in the narrow area between shelves, so he could not evade.

Tsukuyomi stopped smiling and spoke.

"If you make it through this, I will admit you understand a bit about us. And if you do, I will show you a certain technique as a reward." She took a breath. "It is an anti-foreign world combat technique we can use without relying on the concepts of our Gear."

Sibyl spoke to Kazami and Izumo in front of the rows of document shelves.

"A portion of the documents have been removed from the freely available First Reference Room as well. The period seems to span from 1985 to about 1995. Half of '96 is missing as well."

Kazami recognized one of those years.

"So it's the ten years leading up to '95 when this Gear's negative concepts began to activate?"

"Testament. It is the ten years leading up to the great Kansai earthquake. …I am sure you have heard that information on UCAT was nearly exposed when we lost so many people in that earthquake. To avoid inspections and whistleblowers, the documents were destroyed. Some people refer to it as UCAT's blank period."

"So they decided it was safer for the important documents to not even exist, is that it? It is true the security here is ridiculously tight."

"Is it?" asked Kazami with a hint of uncertainty.

"Yeah," said Izumo with a nod. "I was looking at a porn magazine I found with the confiscated documents and none of the contents would reach my brain properly. "

"…Could you stop talking about that kind of nonsense so seriously?"

"Chisato-sama, that is just who Izumo-sama is. I would be more surprised if he said something worthwhile."

"Hey, you two? Are you denying something about me ?"

The other two ignored Izumo's refreshing statement.

"Anyway, Sibyl, thanks for the help. …We really gathered a lot."

"You are going in to train next, right? I will organize it all by the time you are done."

"Thanks," said Kazami again before sighing. "Sibyl, even ignoring the blank period, there's still a great divide between us and the higher ups. Both Sayama and Kaku's grandfathers died before they could learn about them." She turned toward Izumo. "And he couldn't find any documents on his father."

"…I wasn't looking for anything about him."

"Fine, fine. If you say so. I saw you wandering around on your own, though."

Kazami stroked his head as he glared at her and then she took a document from him.

The copied document described 2nd-Gear's past concept weapon development.

She read the top of the fairly old-looking paper.

"A god of war?"

Printed at the top of the A4 piece of paper was the title Overall Diagram of the Humanoid Machine.

Sibyl peered over Kazami's shoulder at the blurry lines of the paper.

"That is a very unrefined design. It is not a direct descendent of the ones from 3rd."

"Well, it's really old. Look, it says 1945…"

Kazami gasped when she realized what her own words meant.

"That's the year Japanese UCAT was founded!"

Sayama took a certain action as the moonlight attack approached.

He looked up at the line of bluish-white lights on the ceiling.

Those lights produced the “moonlight”.

After checking on the faint lights filling the armory, Sayama faced forward.

Tsukuyomi looked a bit surprised.

“You plan to receive the attack? It’ll blow you away!”

“I will not let it!”

Sayama stared at the beam of light that was just about to strike him.

And he swung up his left arm.

With that single motion, he removed his coat and transferred Baku from the coat pocket to his head.

“If this is moonlight…”

Sayama placed the coat over his head as the beam of light approached from the front.

It all happened in an instant.

"If the moonlight is cut off from the moon, it cannot reach me!"

When the coat cut the beam off from the lights on the ceiling, it visibly weakened.

At the same time, Sayama kicked the moonlight up into the bundled-up coat.

The sound of the strike resembled a splash.

Particles of moonlight scattered from below the coat.

And finally, the light disappeared.

The coat fell to the ground, but Sayama left it there and continued moving.

He took another step toward Tsukuyomi.

…Show me 2nd-Gear's anti-foreign world combat technique !

He stepped forward with his left foot and threw a kick with his right. He aimed low down at her feet so it would be difficult to avoid.

He did not hold back because his opponent was a woman or because she was elderly.

"That is what it means to fight."

Sayama kicked.

In the next instant, an unthinkable change occurred.

Tsukuyomi disappeared from before his eyes.

"!?"

His foot flew through empty air and he took a defensive stance.

Wondering where she was, he began to turn around.

"A negotiator should not drop his coat."

Hearing that voice behind him, he hastened his turn. He found his coat held out toward him.

He slowly took it from Tsukuyomi who was holding it.

Based on the timing with which she had held out the coat, Sayama calculated the time it took her to move there.

"After I threw my kick and lost sight of you, you walked behind me and picked up the coat?"

During that time, she had vanished from his sight.

What happened? he wondered while Tsukuyomi showed a bitter smile.

"Mysterious, isn't it? 2nd-Gear developed techniques like this that we can use without concepts. That way we can win no matter when someone wants a fight," she said while looking extremely pleased. "You will be looking into our past now, right? I hope you can bring us an excellent negotiation afterwards."

Kazami looked at the humanoid machine drawn on the diagram in her hand.

It was a metal giant that seemed to be made by connecting together the bodies of warships using giant

cylinders and bolts. The torso was a simple T-shape, but the arms and legs were very thick just like a toy.

Even the modern gods of war UCAT had started sending out into battle more closely resembled humans than this.

"The Yamata Sealing Humanoid Machine named ' Susaou'. Jointly developed between Low and 2nd. …The central format is listed as Mikage format?"

Kazami thought she heard Sibyl gasp at the word " Mikage".

However, Kazami did not ask about it. If Sibyl wanted to talk about it, she would.

She gave a bitter internal smile and continued looking through the blurry words of the copy.

How advanced a machine could they have made when Japanese UCAT was first established?

"The project to construct it was proposed March 12, 1945 and completed August of the following year. So

they started this about half a year before the end of the war. …I'm amazed they could do that while Japan was undergoing tons of air-raids."

"It was developed along with 2nd-Gear, so it most likely works under 2nd-Gear's concepts rather than those of 3rd-Gear, the world of gods of war. That must be why it is called a 'humanoid machine' instead of a god of war. "

"I see."

Kazami nodded and checked the measurements given around Susaou. She read off the blurry writing.

"Crew size: approx. 200 people. Total height: appox. 500…"

She trailed off. Her head was unable to keep up with what she read.

"…What is this? A height of approximately 500 rice? Like, five hundred grains of rice?"

"No, Chisato-sama. That means 500 meters. Meter used to be written with the character for rice."

"Um, Sibyl. Even in a concept space, that's too big to be real."

"But these documents mean it is real," said Izumo. He took a breath and met her gaze. "Are your thoughts bound by common sense by any chance?"

"O-of course they are."

"Well, this huge thing exists somewhere in Tokyo along with Yamata. And there's something even more surprising on that copy."

Izumo moved in closer to her and pointed at one line on the copy.

It listed the names of Susaou's captain and second in command.

"The captain was Ooshiro Hiromasa and the second command was Kashima. …Do you see the UCAT connection now?"

"I don't recognize the name Kashima, but Ooshiro…"

"That's right. …It's all connected between sixty years ago and today."

Chapter 7: Lying Neighbor

Chapter 7

“Lying Neighbor”

The question of something unseen produces a feeling
One’s heart moves because that feeling resides within it
Like the scent of flowers carried on the wind

The question of something unseen produces a feeling

One's heart moves because that feeling resides within it

Like the scent of flowers carried on the wind

After parting ways with Tsukuyomi, Sayama entered the training facility in UCAT's third basement.

He was currently in the locker room. It was one location of several layers created by a concept space.

The room was about twenty meters long and bordered a shower room.

Tall lockers made of a dry white substance lined the wall.

On the way here, Sayama had picked Ooshiro up from the floor in the corridor and told him the following:

"After meeting up with Kazami and the others in the training room, I wish to decide whether we will perform the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear."

But despite saying that, he already intended to go ahead with the negotiation.

…I am interested. What type of negotiation should we use?

He still had not seen how 2nd-Gear viewed the Leviathan Road.

That was one thing he wanted to learn.

"There is also that technique Director Tsukuyomi used …"

What had that been?

Sayama understood pursuing something out of curiosity was dangerous.

However, he could not stop the feeling of curiosity.

The reception desk informed him Kazami and the others had already entered the training room. They all wanted to finish training as quickly as possible to have more time to exchange their ideas on the different issues.

While thinking about various things, Sayama placed Baku on his head and changed.

"I wonder if the others have all finished their Brazilian gymnastics warm up."

The only names on the lockers were Izumo, Boldman, and Sayama.

This locker room was exclusively used by Team Leviathan and Kazami said the girls had a similar arrangement. However, Kazami also said Shinjou alone was treated differently.

Shinjou used the ninth women's locker room, but that was meant for the people UCAT referred to as "VIP Level".

"From what Kazami said, UCAT must really treasure her."

It was true she was quite sheltered and had almost never left UCAT.

They must have their reasons, thought Sayama as he finished changing.

He now wore a thin armored uniform colored primarily white and black. It was made up of a shirt and

tights that covered almost his entire body, a vest, and pants.

His eyes stopped on the ring on his left middle finger as he equipped his arm band.

"They still will not give me Georgius."

Ooshiro had given him that gauntlet during the battle with 1st-Gear.

That mysterious concept weapon had allegedly been found by his mother, but Ooshiro and the others had taken it back after the battle.

With all the unknowns surrounding it, Sayama felt that was the proper way of handling it.

He stared at the ring on his left hand for several seconds.

But then he shook his head.

He endured the pain in his chest and cut off that train of thought.

There was something else he needed to think about now.

Officially, he had to think about how to handle the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear.

And personally…

…*Once my left hand is fully healed, Setsu-kun will leave me*.

Both were issues he would have to face eventually.

Suddenly, he recalled his conversation with Shinjou before leaving school.

In that afterschool classroom, Shinjou had hung his head down, hesitated, explained he was trying to write a novel, and said he resembled Yamato Takeru.

All of those actions had been signs of his desire to say something.

…*If Shinjou-kun grows serious about this, I must face him.*

"Yes."

Sayama nodded and stopped thinking. He then walked forward.

After a few steps, he reached a white automatic sliding door. The training room lay beyond it.

The door emitted an electronic tone and he heard a voice.

—People do not overestimate their power.

The power one believed one had was not an overestimation; one had that power.

That concept linked the locker room with the training room and both become the same.

Then the door opened.

Beyond lay the white walls, floor, and ceiling of a thirty meter square space.

Instead of the large space, Sayama first saw something odd.

It was a body contained within a white armored uniform.

This person was lying on their back in midair. It was a large man flying toward Sayama.

Sayama took an instant to look closer and realized this was Izumo.

"Oh? Have your natural eccentricities grown so great you can finally fly, Izumo?"

"Sayama!? Wait! This is dangerous! Stop saying stupid things and catch him!"

Oh, it is Kazami, thought Sayama. *Kazami is always the one to use violence against him, so why does she want me to catch him?*

Was Izumo's flight not her doing?

On second glance, Izumo was not flying through the air the way he usually did.

"When Kazami sends him flying, it is more…how should I put it? Rich and dense?"

"The way he's flying is dangerous, so catch him! Do you want me to send *you* flying!?"

Sayama caught on immediately.

"It is not my style to catch a guy like Izumo, but if I must."

Sayama prepared himself to catch Izumo and watched him fly closer.

Izumo's trajectory was a bit high, so Sayama had to catch him from a bit below.

To spread his legs backwards, Sayama took a large step back.

As soon as he did, the door's sensor lost sight of him and the door closed in an instant.

"Oh?" he muttered.

"Gbh!?"

The closed door shook as Sayama heard a pig-like squeal and a sound of impact on the other side.

The noise shook the lockers and produced a creaking that made one's skin crawl.

"…"

Sayama remained motionless. He stared silently at the door while still in the pose to catch Izumo.

He had several thoughts, but he drove them all out of his head with a single sigh.

"Some things are simply outside of human control. What a pain."

He stepped up to the door and it immediately opened once more.

He found Izumo standing there with blood running from his head.

"Oh, so you are fine. Such a disappointment for humankind."

"D-damn you! Do I look fine to you, stupid Sayama!"

"Anyone with that much energy is doing well enough. And with you, anything short of death counts as fine, Izumo."

"And if I do die?"

Sayama thought on that question. Finally, he clapped his hands together and Baku imitated the action on his head.

"A light wound?"

"Okay, you idiot. Do you mind if I say something? It's for your own good."

"What is it? If you are going to praise me, I would prefer you wait until after I complete some large job."

"You belong in a hospital."

"You do enjoy saying rude things, don't you? Ha ha ha . You are a bastard at unprecedented levels."

"Wa ha ha. I'm nothing compared to you, you cruel bastard. And more importantly…"

Izumo stood up and turned toward one corner of the training room.

From Sayama's perspective, it was the back left corner. Kazami and three others stood there.

The first was Sibyl who wore a white armored uniform with skirt and everything else included.

The second was Shinjou who wore a white armored uniform and held a large metal staff.

And the third was a woman wearing a black armored uniform, a skirt, and a black three-cornered hat.

Sayama recognized this woman who held a bamboo broom and whose sleeve swelled out at the shoulders.

"Diana Zonburg."

"Oh, are you finally here? From what I hear, you met with Director Tsukuyomi of 2nd-Gear. Have you already decided to negotiate with them?"

"No, not yet. After training here, I thought I would discuss it with the old man."

"I see," said Diana in a relieved voice. "Then do you still only have some small questions about 2nd-Gear?"

"Does that matter?"

"Yes. I have one thing to teach you to ensure you do not take this negotiation lightly. This is something very important for the Leviathan Road you are about to head down."

On the first floor of Taka-Akita Academy's third general school building, the setting sun filled the hallway through windows with no glass.

Ooki was stooped over by the wall and sweeping.

Behind her, Siegfried held a broom as well.

"Is this good enough?" she asked.

Siegfried stopped sweeping and ran a finger across the window frame.

"This is still fairly dirty…"

"That isn't from the fight just now!"

Ooki let out an exhausted sigh and looked around.

She saw windows with no glass and a scorched hallway.

She changed how she looked at the situation and spoke her thoughts out loud.

"Siegfried-san, who was that Diana woman?"

"My niece."

"That isn't what I meant." Ooki looked around at the glass shards in the dustpan. "Who is she to Sayama-kun and the others?"

The ends of her eyebrows lowered as she asked and Siegfried initially remained silent.

Ooki turned around and tilted her head at his silence.

Finally, he replied with a question of his own while looking down at her.

"Why do you ask that?"

Ooki smiled and gave an answer.

"Because they are my students," she said as if that was only natural. "It worries me."

"I see."

Siegfried's expression changed.

He smiled slightly.

Without showing any more of his true feelings, the sorcerer spoke.

"I do not know the details either, but Diana arrived in Japanese UCAT during the 1980s. She was a consultant in magic spells. And…she remained until the end of '95."

"You mean… she stayed until that earthquake?"

"Yes," replied Siegfried. "Just like the original UCAT members had the Eight Great Dragon Kings, it seems the old UCAT leading up to the earthquake had a group known as the Five Great Peaks. Diana is one of them. … At the time, they were apparently trying to learn and use the combat techniques of each Gear. Why, I do not know. "

"In that case, this was not her true strength."

Ooki looked across the hallway. The windows were gone and portions were scorched, but there was no more destruction than that.

Siegfried nodded and spoke.

"She may have seen a user of 1st-Gear's true power as a chance to test the power of hers which is not borrowed. But I doubt she was taking this seriously." He took a breath. "Before she left the school, she told me she had something to teach those who would be following in our footsteps."

Shinjou's eyes opened in surprise as she watched the mock battle being used as training.

Sayama was fighting, but…

"He can't do anything…"

As she watched, Sayama continually back stepped as he moved along the training room floor.

He was pursued by a woman in a black armored uniform and a three-cornered hat. She was the woman named Diana from German UCAT.

Today was the first time Shinjou had seen her.

Just as Shinjou had finished changing in the women's locker room, the woman had surprised her by suddenly entering.

…She has a really nice figure.

Shinjou had immediately continued on into the training room, so she had not spoken with the woman as she changed.

However, the nod the woman had given in lieu of a greeting had seemed nice enough.

Shinjou did not think the woman was an evil person. But perhaps that was due to her naiveté.

At any rate, the woman was definitely giving Sayama trouble.

She moved by walking and her weapon was a broom.

Diana would walk up and try to sweep Sayama's feet out from under him with the broom.

That was all she did. She swept the broom with a wide motion and her walking pace was relaxed. She was not using any kind of spell.

And yet…

"Sayama-kun! In front of you! She's coming!"

Diana approached from directly in front of Sayama, but he did nothing despite wielding a sword.

Once again, he only took action a moment after she cried out.

"…"

His eyes suddenly focused on Diana who stood directly in front of him.

Diana tilted her head.

"What is it?"

Sayama's eyebrows rose slightly and he leaped to the left.

An instant later, Diana swept her broom along the spot he had been in a moment before.

Shinjou heard the bamboo brush scrape cross the floor.

Kazami stood to Shinjou's left and she finally spoke.

"Kaku was taken out by that broom. She knocked someone as big as him flying with one sweep of a broom. Who is she?"

Sibyl, who stood to Kazami's left, tilted her head.

"That woman came from the locker room Shinjou-san always uses, did she not? In that case, I assume she is close to either Ooshiro-sama or Itaru-sama."

"Probably," said Kazami as she folded her arms and looked back across the room.

Shinjou followed Kazami's gaze and saw Diana walking toward Sayama once more.

Kazami clicked her tongue at the scene.

"Why can't Sayama do anything?"

"Hmm… Do you think she's using some kind of ability? Like some kind of martial arts."

"You mean martial arts instead of magic?"

"Yes. I don't know how to say it exactly, but she isn't using any spells or concepts. In that case, I think she has to be using some kind of deceptive martial art."

As far as Shinjou could see, Diana was walking normally.

However, Sayama would lose sight of her.

"And he notices her again when she stops."

Exactly that happened and Sayama back stepped away .

As she watched that scene play out again and again, Shinjou recalled what she had just said.

Diana would stop just before Sayama noticed her.

…It looks like Sayama-kun is noticing Diana-san and then moving out of the way, but what if that isn't what's happening ?

"Is Diana-san stopping to purposefully let him notice her?"

"If so, she's quite the odd person. She's waiting for Sayama to give up."

Hearing Kazami's comment, Shinjou could not help but shout out.

"Stick with it, Sayama-kun!"

As if in response, Sayama leaped toward her.

From a distance of approximately five meters, Sayama called out to Shinjou.

"Shinjou-kun."

Shinjou did not know how to respond when he suddenly called her name.

"Shinjou-kun," he called again.

"Eh? Wh-what is it?"

Sayama nodded.

"It seems I am a bit confused right now. I could use some help calming down, so-…"

"No repeating a joke by telling me to stick out my butt, okay?"

"…"

"Wh-why are you lost in thought now?"

She is a surprisingly strict person, decided Sayama. *Anyway…*

"Shinjou-kun, let us talk about this battle. You called out to me to tell me Diana is approaching, did you not?"

"Yes. …It didn't look like you could see her."

"I could not see her."

"Eh?" said Shinjou. "H-hey, Sayama-kun, what do you mean? Has the twisted wiring of your brain finally affected your vision too?"

"I see we have much to discuss after this is over, but I will overlook it for now. …So you are saying you could see her, Shinjou-kun?"

"Y-yes. Kazami-san and Sibyl-san could as well."

"I see," said Sayama with a nod.

He understood something now.

The technique Diana was using was the same one Tsukuyomi had used.

He still did not know what it was, but he had begun to analyze it.

"The effects are limited to me, so she is not actually hiding somewhere. Does that mean she is preventing my senses from detecting her?"

And…

"Kazami, one quick question. How did Izumo lose?"

"Well… Um, he turned his right side toward her and…"

"And he attacked straight ahead the instant she began to move?"

"Yes, but she easily evaded and…well, you saw what happened."

"I see," said Sayama with another nod.

Shinjou then asked a question from behind him.

"Is there anything you can do, Sayama-kun? You don't see her when she approaches, right?"

"It is not that I am not seeing her. I think I am being made so I cannot see her."

He sent a self-deprecating smile toward the floor and thought.

He still did not know on what principle this technique functioned. However…

"There is still a way of defeating an unseen enemy," said Sayama.

He held his Cowling Sword to the right with his left hand.

He lowered the tip in an iai stance.

He faced forward at Diana's smile ten meters away.

She had said she had something to teach him.

Was that this technique?

…Or is there still something more?

Shinjou saw the atmosphere around Sayama change.

His back tensed a bit as he focused.

She did not feel comfortable speaking to him now because the slightest stimulus would cause him to move. However, she heard Kazami speak quietly next to her.

"This is bad. This is the same as when Kaku was defeated. The only difference is his stance."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Kaku stopped moving and took an offensive stance, remember? Do you know the way to attack something unseen?"

Shinjou thought, but a glance at Sayama and Diana told her she had no time.

So she said, "Sorry, but just tell me."

"Sure. I'm betting Kaku's idea was to attack his enemy when he lost sight of her."

"So… When she disappeared, he knew she was coming in for the attack?"

"Testament," replied Sibyl. "But look. Diana-sama disappears from Sayama-sama's vision when she is approximately seven steps away from him."

Shinjou mentally converted the distance of seven steps and her expression stiffened.

"Do you get it now, Shinjou? Seven steps is about four meters. At that distance, she can easily circle around or stop where she is. But since her opponent can't know what she will do, he can only attack blindly. That's why Kaku swung V-Sw like a bat."

Kazami glanced over at the right corner of the training room.

A giant blade was stabbed into the white wall.

It was V-Sw. Its console was still active and a short sentence was displayed on it.

"So lonely."

"What a pain," sighed Kazami. "He should have expanded it to its second form."

What should I do? wondered Shinjou.

Like before, she could tell Sayama what Diana was doing. However…

…Sayama-kun said he had a way.

Shinjou stared at Sayama's back.

He remained perfectly still and waited for his opponent.

And so Shinjou decided to remain silent and wait.

Just like Sayama, she waited for it all to begin.

Diana tilted her head when she saw Sayama's stance.

His stance was different than Izumo's when she had swept him away.

Izumo had held his Cowling Sword in both hands like a bat, but Sayama held his Cowling Sword at his right hip in his left hand.

That iai stance reminded Diana of a backhand in tennis .

He had obviously thought this through.

But, thought Diana. *That will not work.*

She had a reason to think this.

And if Sayama knew that reason, he would not have done nothing but run this entire time.

And so Diana thought, *Your way of thinking about this is fundamentally flawed.*

"I will not give you a warning."

…The inexperienced show the most growth after defeat.

Izumo sat in front of the door behind her. He saw no value in his defeat and instead felt only frustration and confusion.

That was fine.

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Those who did not glorify defeat and instead tried to oppose it were the most frightening when one saw them again.

Diana suddenly looked down at the chest of her own armored uniform.

“The insignia of German UCAT.”

The badge displayed Germany divided to the left and right with a cross binding the two halves.

She spoke as she looked down at that image.

“Sayama Mikoto-kun, you are facing a few different question right now, aren’t you? You want to know how you should face 2nd-Gear as the Leviathan Road’s negotiator. And…

“And?”

“You want to know how to relate to someone named Shinjou.”

Sayama's expression remained unchanged and he said nothing. However, that lack of reaction gave an eloquent answer.

Diana took a breath and spoke.

"I will now bring defeat to you."

Sayama's response was a simple one.

"That is impossible," he declared.

"Heh heh. That sounds promising. Will you still stay that if I knock you around a bit?"

"I have been knocked around countless times by my grandfather and others in the past," he said expressionlessly. "And on the psychological side, nothing pains me more than the past. …That is why I will never admit defeat even if I die. As long as you allow me the qualifier of 'eventually' I can confidently declare my victory."

"Herrlich."

A slight smile appeared on Diana's lips. This smile came from her heart.

"Then instead of giving you defeat, I will leave it with you for the moment. Is that good enough?"

"Yes. In that case, I suppose I should say Testament. Do I need to pay it back with interest?"

"Testament. But please send that payment to your enemies. And while I leave this defeat with you, please think about why this happened. If you do, I think you will come to understand something interesting."

"Something interesting? Is this related to my questions concerning 2nd-Gear and…Shinjou-kun?"

"Searching for those answers is your role. And this is my test." She nodded. "Team Leviathan is too inexperienced to see through my technique, but you may show some promise. …I will be testing you on that now."

Her smile deepened and she deemed it an excellent smile.

Everything that produced a smile would result in a cheerful conclusion.

As she thought on that, Diana held her broom forward .

“Questions. They form tests, doubts, riddles, truth seeking, searches, and definite displays of resistance.”

She walked forward.

“Think and ask questions. Send a question mark to yourself so that you can fight back.”

As she spoke, Diana continued toward Sayama.

Sayama watched the witch approach.

With her current gait, she was twelve steps away.

A footstep quickly reduced that to eleven. A heel cut it down to ten.

Once he counted down through nine, eight, and seven, she would be in her territory.

With a natural pace, she made that seventh step.

At the same moment, Diana disappeared from Sayama 's senses.

No, thought Sayama.

He was seeing Diana a bit to the right.

He was seeing her, but his mind could not sense her.

Her footsteps and presence were both there, but his senses would not accept it.

…What is this?

His perception was out of sync with his senses. With a smile, Diana approached to a distance of six steps.

Sayama felt a chill.

This was when he had made his back steps previously.

Diana had stopped here and his perception of her had returned.

But she did not stop this time.

She continued on.

For an instant, he was not sure if he should evade or not.

This urge to evade was what Izumo had transformed into an attack earlier.

Sayama felt it was commendable that Izumo had been able to resist evading.

But Izumo's attack had been evaded and he had been blown away.

Seven steps or about four meters was far enough to evade almost any close quarters attack.

Faced with that fact, Sayama knew he had to grasp Diana's location directly in front of him.

While wondering what he should do, Sayama had found a certain method.

Shinjou saw Sayama suddenly step forward toward Diana.

An “ah” escaped her lips.

She realized what Sayama was doing.

“He’s going to fight even though he can’t see her.”

Just because he could not see her did not mean she had disappeared.

She was there.

If his opponent would circle around outside his attack range, he just had to fill that gap himself.

That was the method Sayama chose and he continued to move.

As Sayama stepped forward, he held his right hand out ahead of him.

Diana had been walking straight toward him, but his outstretched hand stopped her.

No longer able to walk forward, Diana chose to evade. Her body moved to the side as she began to step out of the way.

At the same time, Sayama's Cowling Sword shot out in his left hand. It formed a white arc from his right hip to directly in front of him.

"…!"

Even if he could not see his opponent, he could guide her with a few different movements.

If he stopped her from moving forward, she would definitely move either left or right.

And a sword swung from the right hip would extend the farthest to the left. In that case...

…She'll evade to the right!

Diana circled outside the range of the sword and to Sayama's right.

The witch calmly evaded the blade.

However, Shinjou saw another smile. This smile was on Sayama's lips.

Shinjou could guess why he had that smile. Sayama's primary weapon was not his sword.

"Seh!!"

His right leg shot toward Diana in a high speed kick.

He put his hips behind this kick in a way only one trained in hand-to-hand fighting could.

It all happened in an instant.

The sharp trajectory of his leg struck the witch and a sound of impact rang out.

Sayama felt the blow in his leg. However…

"It was not a direct hit!"

"No, it was not. You think too much of yourself, but you did well for someone at your level."

He could see Diana.

The black witch showed no sign of pain and no sign of having taken a blow.

He noticed his leg had not struck her.

She was holding her broom in front of her in her left hand. His leg had struck the broom's handle.

"…"

She had not taken any kind of stance. She had simply held the broom forward. It was almost as if…

…It looks like my leg struck the broom she had held out in advance.

"I knew what you were doing," she said.

"You knew?"

"Sorry. I could have knocked you away before you even attacked, but you would not have accepted that result. I needed to show you that your chosen method would not work."

Diana went on to describe Sayama's strategy.

"You chose to forestall my movement and lead me as you saw fit, didn't you? But that does not work against someone who knows how you think."

Diana drew back the broom and Sayama lowered his leg.

They both took a breath, and…

"!"

Sayama suddenly threw a left kick.

It was fast and he had chosen a moment when her guard was down.

However…

"How naïve."

Sayama's kick was blocked by the handle of Diana's broom as if that was the natural result.

Sayama frowned and Diana smiled.

"Do you understand now?"

He did. At some point, her broom had moved from her left hand to her right hand.

Just like her walking, he had been unable to perceive that movement of the broom.

What was happening?

The one thing he understood was that he did not understand.

"If you are faced with an enemy who can do this, you and those behind you are done for," said Diana.

Sayama listened to her and uttered a grinding question through his clenched back teeth.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why can I not see you even though I am seeing you?" he asked as if throwing away the breath.

"Testament."

Diana raised her head. Her eyebrows returned to normal and strength left her expression as she showed a true smile.

"That contradictory question is a very Japanese. I believe a man in Japanese mythology named Yamato Takeru used a method like this to defeat an opponent. He kept his opponent from suspecting anything, approached , and attacked."

"…!"

Sayama recalled what Shinjou Setsu had told him afterschool.

…What if I was Yamato Takeru?

He had thought that meant Shinjou Setsu had some lie.

And he had given a certain response to those words.

He had made a certain promise to Shinjou Setsu.

…When Shinjou-kun gets serious and tries to tell me something, I will face him.

He focused on the idea of "facing" him.

Sayama realized a new meaning for that word.

He realized a new way of thinking about his promise with Shinjou, his training with Diana, 2nd-Gear's acclimation to Low-Gear, and how he should carry out the Leviathan Road.

It was all the same.

If he did not properly face those things, he would lose something.

And so Sayama nodded.

He opened his mouth and rephrased his previous question into a new question.

"Why am I not seeing you even though I should be seeing you?"

That question would allow him to face his opponent's true form. His question was based in conviction.

Naturally, Diana had no way of reading his thoughts.

But even so, she nodded in response.

"Testament. Think on this. Face everything that stands before you so that you do not lose sight of them. … Struggling against that sort of question is a good deed for you and your comrades."

He heard her speak.

And as soon as he realized that, Sayama saw something white.

It was the ceiling.

He did not even know when he had been knocked into the air.

Is even that a question I must ask? thought Sayama.

Chapter 8: The Beginning of an Answer

Chapter 8

“The Beginning of an Answer”

An unrealized past awakens and begins to move
During that short history
Chain-like bonds are created

An unrealized past awakens and begins to move

During that short history

Chain-like bonds are created

The concept weapon development department was located on UCAT's second basement next to the maintenance storage room and armory.

The development department was divided into four large sections: the design room, the production room, the experiment room, and storage.

The design room was a fifty meter square space divided up into partitions.

Inside one partition, Kashima and Tsukuyomi were looking at Susaou's design diagram.

While he had been staring at the landslide, it seemed Tsukuyomi had met with Team Leviathan's representative.

He had also heard that other members of Team Leviathan had entered the Second Reference Room.

"They are interesting children."

With that introduction, they began discussing old times.

As they looked at the documents on Susaou, Tsukuyomi spoke.

"It was only nine years ago, but it feels so nostalgic. The development department had only just been reorganized underneath me. As soon as you were assigned to the department, you asked me what is in Tachikawa. But I was as new to UCAT as you, so I didn't know."

Tsukuyomi gave a bitter smile and Kashima gave one of his own.

"That's right. But you negotiated with the higher ups and acquired the necessary documents from the Second Reference Room. You gave me the documents on Susaou which exists in the concept space set up within the former Tachikawa Airfield and current Showa Memorial Park."

"But Susaou did not live up to your expectations."

"That's right," said Kashima again.

He had gone to see Susaou just once.

"Examining Susaou was the development department's first job once it was reorganized after the great Kansai earthquake. But…"

Kashima displayed a single image on his laptop.

It was a photograph. With the blue sky in the background, a giant figure stood with clouds around its head.

That giant form was over five hundred meters tall.

However, its entire form was slightly distorted.

"Yes, it makes sense if you think about it. Even nine years ago, it had been about fifty years since Susaou had been active. And Susaou is a humanoid machine built to oppose and confine the ultra high temperatures of Yamata. A used weapon is always on the road to destruction."

He zoomed in on the image.

Susaou grew larger as it stood in front of the bright sun.

Portions of the blackened armor covering its giant limbs and body had melted and the bridge in the head had vanished as if it had been gouged out.

“On his deathbed, my grandfather mentioned the box of the bridge in the head, but that no longer exists.”

The head had been destroyed.

The metal had melted and formed a square stage with fifteen meter sides. Only a single object stuck up from that floor.

It was a straight piece of metal around a meter and a half long.

“The only thing left in the remains of the bridge is Totsuka, the Cowling Sword my grandfather created to seal Yamata. That’s all.”

As he muttered into the LCD monitor, he heard a sigh from behind him.

"And we went through all the formalities to get there. Even if it is under UCAT's control, we received permission from each country's UCAT."

Tsukuyomi's words drew nearer as she leaned in toward the monitor.

She then spoke as if yearning for the past.

"Afterwards, you began researching concept weapons, but soon drew back from real development and design. Now you act as the demon of fine-tuning and only perform practicality checks on new models."

"That is not all I do. I have other jobs. Remember that weird gum project?"

"But you are avoiding any jobs that use 2nd-Gear's power and the name of Kashima, aren't you? Is that landslide accident from eight years ago still bothering you?"

Kashima gave no answer. He chose other words for his response.

"Right now, my interests lie elsewhere."

The photograph of Susaou was not the only image on the monitor.

It also showed photographs of his wife and young daughter.

Tsukuyomi grinned bitterly.

“Ha ha. I guess we can’t compete with your family.”

“Director Tsukuyomi, how are things going regarding the previous director?”

“Oh, you mean my husband? Well, I think it would be nice if I found anything he left behind, but all the documents from his time here vanished in the blank period. What was he doing without telling me while I was in IAI?”

Kashima continued to stare at the LCD monitor, so Tsukuyomi patted his shoulder as if trying to cheer him up.

“Being that fond of your kid is a good thing, but don’t forget that you’re someone’s kid too. My daughter is always out late job hunting and going to informative seminars. When she gets back home, she eats, bathes, and

sleeps before heading right back out the next morning. She isn't a carrier-based aircraft, so she should really get some rest."

"Your daughter is an F-14? But you haven't told her about UCAT or 2nd-Gear, right? You seem to be conforming to Low-Gear, but…"

"Is that why you're confused? You can't figure out why this eccentric director would leave the rights to the Leviathan Road with someone trying to be a Low-Gear resident like you?"

"We…"

Kashima started to speak, but trailed off.

"…"

Finally, he shook his head.

Tsukuyomi patted his shoulder again. She did so more softly and gently than before.

"Listen, Kashima. I turn 50 this year and I haven't gone through any longevity procedures. I doubt I can remain on the forefront of development for another ten

years. From now on, things will be run by you and the others of your younger generation that knows nothing at all of the war. That is why I think you need to give this some thought."

"Give this some thought? My grandfather's dying words and my own power have already-…"

Kashima stood up but stopped when he saw the look on Tsukuyomi's face.

She still stood at the entrance to the partition, but her expression was very gentle.

One look at that and he lost all words.

I can't stand up to that, he thought as he fell silent.

She smiled a bit when she saw him sit back down and wait for her to speak.

"I like seeing a man waiting for a woman to speak. Makes me jealous of your wife."

"Sorry, director, but your age has not been kind to that ingratiating voice."

"Just leave me be. …Anyway, you need to think about your stance as part of 2nd-Gear. Also…"

"Also?"

"This will likely be your last chance to be involved with Susaou."

"It doesn't matter. The remnants my grandfather mentioned are no longer there. Only Totsuka remains."

Kashima opened a text file on his laptop.

The document contained the results of some research he had done. It provided the reason 2nd-Gear could not leave UCAT.

"The records contained a single fact. Susaou's captain spoke the word to control Yamata and sealed Yamata in Totsuka, but he died. That was all."

"And with his death, Low-Gear lost the word to seal Yamata," muttered Tsukuyomi with a sigh. "It's a difficult issue. If the Low-Gear engineer who once sealed Yamata had survived and that word had remained with Low-Gear, we could have formed a full allegiance with Low-Gear."

"Yes." Kashima nodded and spoke that engineer's name. "Ooshiro Hiromasa. The father of UCAT's leader, Ooshiro Kazuo, the grandfather of Team Leviathan's supervisor, Ooshiro Itaru, and the man who my grandfather resented for not saving 2nd-Gear." Kashima gave a bitter smile. "Of course, I did not carry on his grudge. But…"

"But?"

Tsukuyomi repeated his last word and Kashima gave a troubled smile.

"But that is why I am finding this decision so hard to make."

Sayama and Ooshiro Kazuo walked down a UCAT corridor.

After Diana left the training room, Sayama had told the others that Tsukuyomi had used a technique similar to the mysterious one Diana had used.

That had been enough for the others to agree to 2nd-Gear for the next Leviathan Road.

"Someone might be leading us in this direction, though. Not knowing is kind of frustrating."

Kazami's comment had summed up everyone's thoughts.

Sayama was also interested in what sort of negotiation he should use.

Shinjou had remained in the training room, saying she wanted to perform additional target practice, but Kazami and the others had agreed to meet up in the cafeteria once they were done sorting through the documents they had gathered.

Sayama's job was to tell Ooshiro they intended to go ahead with 2nd-Gear's Leviathan Road.

However, Ooshiro was currently walking quickly alongside him.

Wearing his suit once more, Sayama quickened his pace to line up beside him.

"Old man, aren't you in a lot more of a hurry than before?"

"No, no. I'm just testing a new prototype."

He showed Sayama a digital pedometer at his waist.

It was a yellow plastic device with an LCD showing a stylized girl performing some kind of ritualistic dance. She seemed to be in as sort of trance.

"There is a lot I want to say about that, but it is relatively normal compared to some other things UCAT is developing."

"UCAT may be developing it, but it will be sold as an IAI product. We can't make it too out there."

"What is the product called?"

Ooshiro answered with a confident thumbs up.

"This is the digital pedometer 'Mambo-chan'. The character is a shaman from an esoteric religion."

"Oh? That is quite the uncreative name."

"Yes. To show her desire for you to walk with the pedometer as much as possible, I wanted to name her Pedo Lover, but that was immediately rejected."

"That was for the best. But I get the feeling one can buy a pedometer anywhere these days."

"This one is a bit different. Mambo-chan has a surprisingly direct personality. If you stop before reaching the set number of steps, she scolds you with her shaman power."

"Just out of curiosity, what is this power?"

"Seventeen fully charged shocks on the level of a stun baton."

"I see. If you slack off, you end up passed out on the road. Are you going to sell them to the marines for marching training?"

"Don't worry. Situations in which you have to stop are rare and the tension can accelerate your diet. See? I'm walking just fine."

Sayama thought for a moment.

"Old man," he finally said. "Where have you tested the prototype so far?"

"Within UCAT. Why?"

"I have one question."

"What is it?"

Sayama looked up at the ceiling as he walked and his expression finally grew serious.

"Have you ever heard of traffic lights and railroad crossings?"

Ooshiro looked up at the ceiling as he walked and his expression finally grew serious.

"Now what do I do?"

"Oh? So you finally reached the truth? Now, the current problem is the automatic door visible in the distance. How long does it take for the electric shocks to activate?"

"M-Mambo-chan is short tempered, so she suddenly attacks if you stand still for even a second."

"What about turning around? We can make a quick U-turn and come back the way we came."

"Unfortunately, Mambo-chan insists you resolutely continue on. If you turn around, she gets mad. …Ahhhh! We really are getting close to the door! Mikoto-kun! Could you go on ahead and open it for me!?"

"To change the subject, is it fine if we go with 2nd-Gear for the next Leviathan Road?"

"Don't completely change the subject! And please hurry! I have less than fifty meters now!"

"Hm," said Sayama with a nod. "In that case, I have something I wish to ask you again. Please answer me honestly."

"Is this any time for that!? Ahh, Shinjou-kun would help me if she were here. Is she still in training?"

"Yes. She said she wanted to do some target practice, but does she really need that much training?"

Ooshiro's expression was impatient, but he still formed a smile.

"Sh-she has always scored highly in training. She has problems in real battles, though. She hesitates and can't fire."

"But…"

"Yes, she has improved somewhat since the battle with 1st-Gear, but the development department's output records for Ex-St show she has not fully overcome it."

Sayama recalled the battle with 1st-Gear. Shinjou had wielded enough power to be on even footing with Fafnir Custom.

"You mean she can draw out even more power than that? What is holding her power back?"

"Has she given you a reason?"

Sayama thought for a moment.

"She has no memories before six years ago."

"I see. There is that, but there is a bigger reason too."

"A bigger reason?"

Ooshiro nodded.

"Mikoto-kun," he began as a warning. "It seems you do not understand. Then again, this is very like you."

"What do you-…?"

Before he could finish speaking, Sayama recalled something from earlier that day.

…Is the hint to this "Yamato Takeru"?

Shinjou Setsu had said that was his "lie".

Did Shinjou Sadame have something like that as well?

Sayama nodded and said, "If I do not understand what is holding back Shinjou-kun's power, I will be killed by her like Kumaso Takeru. Is that what you think?"

Ooshiro gave no response, but Sayama's thoughts continued on.

He recalled how Kumaso Takeru had been killed by Yamato Takeru.

"He crossdressed and, even as he stood right before Kumaso Takeru, the disguise worked and his true form remained unseen."

He recalled what he had thought during his fight with Diana.

...Why am I not seeing you even though I should be seeing you?

This led Sayama to a sudden realization.

He realized another doubt concerning Shinjou Setsu and Sadame.

"Oh, I get it now. That was a complete blind spot for me."

"Do you know now why Shinjou-kun cannot use her full power, Mikoto-kun?"

"I do. I sure am brilliant."

"That last part does not matter, so could you get to the main point?"

"I am in a good mood, so I will say Testament." Sayama confidently gave his answer. "Shinjou-kun is crossdressing. That is, Setsu-kun is dressing up as a girl to be Sadame-kun."

"Mikoto-kun…"

"What is it? Why are you staring at me with such suspicion?"

"Are you the type that gives your answer without giving it much thought?"

"When have I ever jumped to a hasty conclusion? Say that again and I will knock you to the ground."

"That's hasty enough as it is!"

"Calm down, calm down," said Sayama as he held a hand out to restrain Ooshiro. "At any rate, it seems I let my guard down concerning Shinjou-kun."

Sayama began to think once more. He had confirmed that Shinjou Setsu was a boy at the public bath.

…But I never confirmed that Sadame-kun is a girl.

He had seen Shinjou Sadame's breasts before, but that might have been a UCAT trick.

If so, they have frightening technology, thought Sayama with a cold sweat. *I should have touched them to make sure.*

He had known her for a month, so why had he never considered gently groping them?

…I was careless.

"M-Mikoto-kun, I do not know what you are thinking about so seriously, but let me give you a warning."

"What is it?"

"Committing crimes is a big no-no."

"Ha ha ha ha. How can you say that as an old man whose very existence is a crime? And do you really think someone as clever as me would do that?"

"Ha…ha ha ha. I-I suppose not even you would."

"Exactly. If I explain the situation, she will understand."

"Wh-what did you just say?"

"Nothing. More importantly, you might want to look forward."

Ooshiro looked like he still wanted to say something, but he panicked when he looked ahead.

"Wah! We're less than thirty meters from the automatic door! Mikoto-kun! Please hurry up and open it !"

"Now then, old man. The issue concerning Shinjou-kun was a worthwhile digression, but we need to get to the main issue."

"You're ignoring me!? And do we really need to talk now!?"

"We do. Now, calmly listen to what I have to say for the remaining 25 meters. My first question is whether a relative of yours was involved with the destruction of 2nd-Gear."

"Yes! Yes! One went to 2nd-Gear as an engineer!"

"Tell me why in detail."

"H-how much detail!?"

Sayama thought for a moment on that impatient question.

"About twenty meters' worth, I suppose."

"I'm going to ignore that. Anyway, 2nd-Gear could not control Yamata with their own techniques, so they hoped to get the help of engineers from other Gears! They thought an idea from another Gear's viewpoint could solve the problem! But… Ahhh! The door's less than ten meters away! Hurry, hurry, hurry!"

"A quick question: do you really think I will open the door until I have heard what I want to hear?"

"That reaction really pisses me off! Let's see… Anyway , my father didn't make it in time! So even though they resented the engineers who had evacuated, they worked together to build the giant humanoid machine and the sealing sword and used them to fight back against Yamata!"

"Lastly, what were those machines known as?"

"The giant humanoid machine was Susaou! The sealing Cowling Sward was Totsuka!"

"I see. That is what I wanted to know. So may we go with 2nd-Gear for the next Leviathan Road?"

"Yes, yes! Just hurry!"

"You did not seem to give that much thought," replied Sayama as he hurried to the door.

Ooshiro breathed a sigh of relief just as the door opened.

However, two large obstacles stood in his way.

They were two humans.

The aboveground portion of the UCAT facility took the form a building disguised as a transportation administration building.

The fifth floor of that building contained a certain private office.

The room was filled with scattered piles of documents and trash and a single figure was visible beyond the piles of documents on the large desk.

A man in a black suit and sunglasses sat in the desk's chair.

He held a local newspaper.

His eyes moved across the text, but he did not appear to be actually reading it.

He folded the newspaper to view the back and brushed up his white hair.

"…"

He suddenly looked up.

He had heard quiet footsteps in front of the room's door.

He quickly folded the newspaper and tossed it near the door.

It made a dry rustling sound as it fell to the floor.

In the very next moment, the office door opened and a maid wearing a black dress and white apron entered.

She held a silver tray carrying a cup.

However, she did not look over to see if the man was at the desk. It was as if his presence was a foregone conclusion.

As she took a step forward, her expressionless gaze noticed the newspaper at her feet. She picked it up with one hand.

"Itaru-sama, today's morning paper has arrived. Would you like to read it?"

"What's the headline, Sf?"

"Tes. 'In Shinjuku yakuza turf war last night, one of our own reporters met a surprising end!' "

"No, thanks. Throw it over there."

"Tes."

With only a single shake of her short hair, Sf walked straight over the documents scattered on the floor.

However, she did not leave any footprints on those documents. Not a single paper so much as shook.

Once Sf reached Itaru, she held out the silver tray in her hand.

“Itaru-sama, I have brought your coffee.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Tes. I simply wanted to say that, so do not worry. Shall I dispose of it here?”

“The last time I told you to dispose of it, you really did dump it on the floor.”

“Tes. That was two weeks after I arrived. I have checked that memory to a depth level of five, so there is no mistaking it.”

“Yeah, I remember it too. I ultimately had to wipe the floor myself. It was also the first time I thought about having you dismantled, so it’s a day to remember. High-quality machines are so wonderful because they do what you tell them to.”

"Tes. I have determined you must be very methodical if you were ready to dismantle me for maintenance within two weeks. But do not worry. I am the pride of German UCAT and my automatic internal cleaning is guaranteed to suffice for 666 years."

"Oh? You perform automatic cleaning?"

終わりのクロニクル

"Tes," answered Sf with a nod. She lightly rotated her wrist. "At night when I have nothing else to do, I remove the parts myself and diligently brush them."

"Automatic just means you do it yourself? Anyway, I don't want the coffee, so you drink it for me."

"I have no digestive system, so I cannot drink it."

"I see. Then I guess I'll drink it. It's a shame you're a machine that can't experience this wonderful flavor."

Itaru turned to Sf with a smile and Sf remained expressionless.

"I am glad you are pleased. Please take your time."

"…Come to think of it, a defective machine like you can't understand sarcasm, can you?"

"Tes. I determined that to be what you wanted. If you change your mind, I can always add emotional functionality."

"Emotional functionality? What would happen if you plugged that in?"

Sf thought for a moment and finally tilted her head.

"Tes. Plugging it in would only get in the way. I would install it internally."

"And what would happen once you installed it?"

"Tes. Once I installed it, I would have emotions."

"For example?"

"No matter how unreasonable a command, I would respond with a smile. No matter how disagreeable a master, I would cry upon his death."

"That isn't emotional functionality. It's robot functionality, you problem machine."

Itaru took the cup Sf held out and took a sip.

Seeing that, Sf tilted her head expressionlessly.

"You can drink coffee now?"

"It's nothing but water, caffeine, flavoring, and coloring. Describing it as similar to poison would not be an exaggeration. I hate it."

"Then why are you drinking it?"

"Because you said you can't, Sf. That makes this your fault."

"Tes. I will make sure to bring some for you after every meal."

"Why? Some kind of unnecessary consideration for your master?"

"Because it is what you want, Itaru-sama," said Sf expressionlessly.

Itaru looked back at her face and finally held up the cup.

"Next time, bring me something colorless. The coloring stains my mouth." He brushed up his white hair . "I only accept meaningless things like color and flavor."

"Tes," said Sf with a nod.

She quickly turned around as Itaru watched.

"…!"

She swiftly turned toward the entrance. Of the two hands holding the tray, she moved her right.

Her right hand held a black handgun which she aimed up at the office entrance.

Itaru then noticed a woman standing in that entrance.

This tall woman wore a black suit.

Her long silver hair swayed as she lightly raised a hand in front of the already closed door.

“Oh, dear. I didn’t expect you to notice when I had only walked in. I miscalculated.”

She used a joking tone, but Sf’s pose did not change.

The tray was still in her left hand and the handgun in her right.

“I detect a powerful philosopher’s stone. You are of unknown affiliation, so I ask you introduce yourself. You have 15 seconds.”

“Oh, my, my. Itaru-kun, can you say something to her? ”

Itaru sighed.

"She is an extremely uninvited guest. Sf, do as I wish."

"Oh? Isn't that a harsh greeting for someone you haven't seen in ten years? And Sf, have you forgotten one of the people who helped create you?"

"When I was re-adjusted in Japanese UCAT, I was formatted for Japanese use."

"Eh!? You're kidding!" The woman brought a hand to her mouth in surprise. "Th-then did they delete all the episodes of the cartoon Herr Himmler I hid in a corner of your memory!? Even the rare episode 'Goebbels is Flustered'!?"

"I just performed a search and discovered a large blank in the surplus memory on the fifth depth level. I have determined that is all that remains."

"Ahh, and after I came here to get them back."

"Hey, Sf, you can go all out eliminating her."

Sf silently aimed the handgun.

The woman frantically waved her hand.

"You really can't joke with her, can you? But what if that goes for me, too?" With a bitter smile, she gave her name. "I am Diana Zonburg of German UCAT. Damit Gut?"

In a corridor on the third basement, Sayama saw two people blocking the way ahead of him.

One was an older bald black man wearing a white armored uniform and a vest.

Sayama had met him during the battle with 1st-Gear. His name was Boldman and he helped coordinate with the normal units.

The other, Sayama did not recognize.

He was a large old Arab man who wore a sand yellow combat coat over his white armored uniform.

He wore a cloth wrapped around his head like a turban and he was facing Sayama.

He may have been old, but he was around two meters tall and his gaze was plenty sharp.

His white eyebrows and long white beard moved.

"Sayama?" he said in a low voice.

Immediately afterwards, Sayama felt a pain in the left side of his chest.

Sayama wondered why until he noticed the man's gaze. He was looking in Sayama's direction, but…

…*He is not looking at me.*

He seemed to be looking toward Sayama yet recalling something from the past.

As soon as Sayama realized that, the pain in his chest strengthened.

"Out of the way, Abram!" shouted Ooshiro.

His slender body and lab coat had made it within three steps of the door.

The Arab man named Abram began to move aside.

"…"

But with Boldman next to him, the door was full. He could not move.

Upon noticing that, Sayama turned to Ooshiro and nodded.

"How very unfortunate."

"I know you don't actually think that!" shouted the old man just as a door along the corridor opened.

However, Sayama knew that door led to the concept space office floor.

Another old man suddenly burst from the darkness on the other side of the door.

He was slender and had long black hair. His name was Yonkichi and he had helped navigate the helicopter taking Sayama to the battle with 1st-Gear.

As Yonkichi left in a hurry, Ooshiro charged into the office floor.

Mambo-chan may have insisted one resolutely continued on, but it seemed right angle turns were acceptable.

The door quickly closed and Yonkichi looked confused .

“Um, what was that about?”

“Nothing more than an old man’s recreation. If he does not go for a walk, he cannot remove the toxins from his body.”

“Testament. Anyway, I must be going!”

Yonkichi quickly ran off in the direction Sayama and Ooshiro had come from.

Sayama let out a breath, realized the pain in his chest was gone, and looked toward the two large men who took a step away from the door and toward him.

Boldman indicated Abram to his side.

"Should I call you commander, Sayama Mikoto? This is the director of the field operation department, Director Abram Mesam. You have not met him yet, have you?"

"Team Leviathan is a special division of the field operation department, so do you supervise us?" asked Sayama.

Abram responded in a low, clear voice.

"No, Team Leviathan essentially has independent authority. Its direct supervisor, Ooshiro Itaru, and the man who just left, Ooshiro Kazuo, both have more authority than me when it comes to you." His tanned face then twisted into a smile. "Nice to meet you. I am Abram Mesam and I control your backup and the other field operation members. If you ever need anything, Boldman here will take care of it."

"Testament," replied Sayama.

He no longer felt any pain from Abram's gaze.

With a quick nod to Sayama's response, the man began walking away. As he did, the hem of his coat flipped around and he asked a question.

"Is 2nd-Gear up next for the Leviathan Road?"

"That is our current plan."

Abram gave a bitter laugh at Sayama's tone.

That laugh reminded Sayama of how Siegfried had reacted to his words after the battle at the Imperial Palace . In that case…

"Director Mesam, were you one of UCAT's original members?"

"Testament."

"I know UCAT originally had Professor Kinugasa at the top, Izumo's grandfather, my grandfather, the old man's father, and Siegfried. How many other primary members were there?"

"Including me, four. There were a total of eight gathered under Kinugasa Tenkyou and every single one of them was stranger than me. And if you wish for it, you will surely meet all of them."

"Is the name Shinjou among those last four?"

"No."

His response was an immediate denial.

Sayama had expected that answer. Just as Fasolt had said, the Shinjou in the National Defense Department had disappeared before he entered UCAT.

Sayama did not know what it meant, but it was as Abram said: if he wished for it, he would surely meet them.

Abram did not turn around, but his voice mixed in with his departing footsteps.

"Will you be going to the Showa Memorial Park in Tachikawa tomorrow?"

Sayama frowned.

That location had just come up at school and Kazami had mentioned it after training as well.

"You mean where that giant humanoid machine is located?"

"Testament. The two machines which saved Low-Gear from Yamata are located there. The first is the five hundred plus meter Susaou. The other is the divine sword Totsuka."

"So it follows the legend of Susanoo?"

"Yes. The Concept Core that is Yamata is closed within Totsuka. I am on my way to the development department to suggest we regulate the concept space around Susaou tomorrow. …How about you perform the preliminary negotiations there with 2nd-Gear's representative?"

"Testament."

Abram did not turn around.

Instead, Boldman turned toward Sayama and raised his right hand as a sign of parting.

Sayama turned his back on the two men just as an old man dashed out of the darkness of the office division to the side.

He was slender, had long white hair, and wore a white coat.

"You are Nijun who I met in the medical room before. Why are you in such a hurry?"

"Oh, Sayama-sama. Did you happen to see my youngest brother?"

"You mean Yonkichi? He rushed off in that direction not long ago."

"Is that so?" Nijun pulled a cell phone from his pocket. "Brother, pass this on to Mitsuaki. That fool is most likely on his way to the second floor."

"What exactly is going on?" asked Sayama.

"That fool has once more tried to build up his own character independent of us. This time, he started adding 'gelge' to the ends of his sentences. As his older brothers, we were just about to punish him."

"I see. With four brothers, it must be difficult to remain coordinated."

"It is. Oh, here comes my brother. I see he has brought the Azure Dragon Sword. …I will be going then."

While making sure not to look toward the newly arriving brother, Sayama asked a quick question.

He was curious about a certain inconsequential matter.

"Excuse me, but I believe an old man whose foolishness is of the highest order ran inside there a bit ago."

"So that would make him the foolishest? No, that might not be a word. Anyway, you mean Ooshiro-sama, correct? He ran inside half-crazed not long ago, but…"

"But?"

"A female employee stood in front of him and held out some tea, but the moment he stopped and began to drink it, he collapsed. He is still collapsed on the floor and convulses once about every five seconds. Everyone assumed it was some new game of his, so we are leaving him be."

"That is fine. This game will end after 17 rounds. I will collect him once the electric shocks are over."

"Goodbye," said Nijun as he left.

Sayama gave an exasperated sigh as he listened to the man's footsteps.

"Why is this place always so lively?"

A short silence filled Ooshiro Itaru's private office.

It was caused by Sf as she faced Diana.

As soon as Diana's introduction came to an end, Sf narrowed her eyes.

"…"

And she suddenly lowered her handgun.

"Tes. I have checked your child string vibration. Name : Diana Zonburg. Affiliation: German UCAT. Rank: Division Chief. Sex: Female. Age: "

"You don't have to give that. Be a good girl now."

Diana quickly walked up alongside Sf, embraced her, and stroked her head and cheek.

Itaru, the owner of the room, sighed and looked up at Diana with half-lidded eyes.

“Why are you here, you old-style German? Did you want to see my present situation?”

“Do the Japanese even know what an emotional reunion is?”

“Then are you here to bring back memories of my past ? You should know I can never forget that past.”

All intonation left Itaru’s voice.

Meanwhile, Sf lightly brushed away the hand rubbing her head.

She took half a step to move between Diana and Itaru.

“I must inspect your belongings.”

“Is that what your master wants?”

"Tes. It is also my decision. But please keep in mind that I will not let my guard down even if you possess no dangerous objects, Diana-sama. Words can be dangerous these days."

"Yes," said Diana with a sigh as Sf's slender fingers poked at her hair and shoulders.

Her smile vanished.

"I guess I still can't talk about old times with Itaru-kun ."

"You can do that once I die. But how about you speak to their empty graves instead of me?"

Diana did not nod in response and her smile did not return.

"Team Leviathan has some interesting members," she said.

"Oh, so you met them? You are Germany's greatest witch who was once known as the Mother Cat. What are you doing here? Are you going to crush any idiot who tries to oppose us like you did during our time?"

Diana still did not nod, but a thin smile appeared on her lips.

"You really haven't changed. But I'm relieved. I can tell you and your father are still manipulating things behind the scenes. I never thought you would manage to gather so many members for Team Leviathan. And you'll gather even more, won't you?"

"How can you be so sure?"

"I saw Director Abram earlier. It was only from a distance, but he was giving a rare smile."

"…So he was smiling."

"Testament. He only smiles when talking about the past. He refers to himself as an imposter, so he must be happy to talk about the true eight." She nodded. "You will gather all of them eventually, won't you? UCAT was originally made up of the destroyers of worlds known as the Eight Great Dragon Kings plus Kinugasa Tenkyou for a ninth member. You will eventually gather the people who will succeed them and go further than we ever did, won't you?"

"Hah. I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Testament. You can say it like that if you want. We are the only ones…no, you are the only one that understands. …I worked to forget what once was, but you are still actively involved," she said. "But promise me one thing. Do not let them become like us. Also, give them a future. …If you do that, I will fully support Team Leviathan."

"I can't promise that, but you still need to help. It doesn't have to be full support."

Diana's shoulders drooped at his expressionless words .

She let out a fake-sounding sigh.

"You are a complicated person. When a woman asks you for a promise, you are supposed to agree."

"I don't need promises. I need people who will work so I don't have to do anything. I don't bargain. Does the Mother Cat ask the owner of the house for permission to play with her toys? What is your job?"

"I think I will defeat them as many times as it takes."

"Oh? From that look, I take it you've already cheerfully done so."

Both of them gave bitter smiles and Diana nodded.

"I will be showing up in training more and more and let them lose to all sorts of things. They have no time and they cannot afford to lose in a real battle."

"Only one that loses and recovers will grow stronger. That is the creed of German UCAT, isn't it?"

"Japan walks down the same path. You seem to be valuing weakness in modern times, though."

"We are a happy country that can accomplish a journey to find ourselves all within our own minds. Of course, that method will only find the version of yourself that is convenient. Any real philosopher would find it laughable."

Diana did not nod, but she smiled at Itaru.

"Testament. I am a bit relieved."

"That Sf is taking her job seriously if you ignore her odd interpretations of orders?"

"Sure, let's go with that. …I did only just reunite with her, though."

Diana then looked down at Sf.

"Sf?"

"What is it?"

"Um," began Diana as the ends of her eyebrows lowered slightly.

She tilted her head while clearly having difficulty deciding what to say.

She looked more directly at Sf who was touching her body.

"Why have you been kneading my breasts for a while now?"

"Tes. They are so needlessly large that I suspect you are hiding something inside them."

"Knowing her, she could have napalm in there, so be careful," commented Itaru.

"I bought it myself."

"Tes," said Sf as she continued to touch Diana.

"Sf," called out Itaru. "If you're searching for concept weapons using the philosopher's stone reaction, it's no use. She modified her body to make herself young again. Just like with Doctor Chao, her entire body will give off the philosopher's stone reaction."

"Tes. Understood. The reaction coming from her chin, chest, and lower belly is especially-…"

"You don't need to bring up any unnecessary information! C'mon, look how cute you are."

Diana forcibly embraced Sf and stroked her head while staring at Itaru with half-lidded eyes.

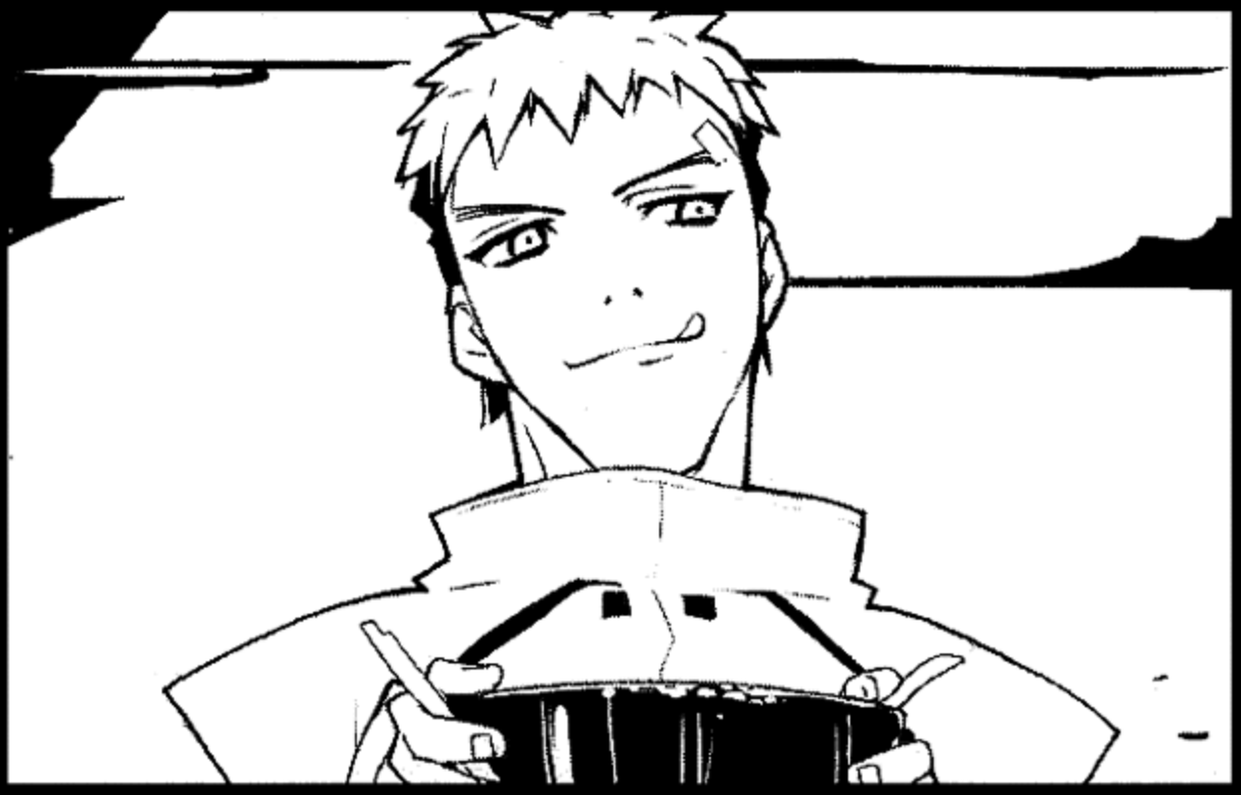
"You didn't install anything weird when you formatted her, did you?" she asked out of the corner of her mouth.

"I used the method you prepared," he replied without nodding.

Chapter 9: Blocked Perception

Chapter 9

“Blocked Perception”



It is your heart that orders you to notice
And so you stand up
And so what should you do?

It is your heart that orders you to notice

And so you stand up

And so what should you do?

UCAT's first basement contained a large cafeteria near the aboveground equipment exit.

The cafeteria was one hundred meters square and almost full. The eight-person tables were filled with people and the walls were lined with vending machines and air conditioners disguised as decorative plants.

The clocks attached to the ceiling at a set interval all read 6:15 PM. Night was falling.

Surrounded by a mixture of voices and footsteps, Sayama and the others sat at a table almost in the very center of the room.

"S-sorry. Changing took more time than I thought," said Shinjou in her casual clothes.

She wore a white shirt and an orange skirt and she carried a bowl containing the cafeteria's doria meal.

The seat next to Sayama was open, so she sat there and once more looked across the people around the table.

In addition to herself, Izumo and Kazami sat together and Sayama had Baku on his shoulder. Sibyl was the same as ever. They all had a meal in front of them and held the document copies Kazami and the others had brought.

Sayama passed her a copy and she looked over it.

"The giant humanoid machine and the Cowling Sword that sealed Yamata?"

"Both of them used 2nd-Gear technology. Also…"

"Also?"

"The project to construct Susaou began on March 12, 1945."

Sayama seemed to contemplate the date he had spoken .

"Did something occur to you, Sayama-kun?"

"No, something caught my attention is all. I will mention it if I receive some kind of confirmation."

Shinjou nodded and began flipping through the pages to store the knowledge in her head.

She suddenly realized Sayama was watching her from the side.

"What is it? Is there something on my face?"

"Yes. Eyes, a nose, a mouth, and hair."

"That is an old joke, but that last part was a bit new. … Anyway, what is it?"

Sayama fell silent as he thought for a moment.

Surprisingly, he seemed to have difficulty saying something.

"It is nothing. I realized something while speaking with the old man earlier, but I have yet to decide what to do about it."

"I see," said Shinjou without pursuing the matter.

She did feel her pulse quicken a bit, though.

There was something she was thinking about as well.

It was something she had discussed with Ooshiro the night before.

…*My lie.*

She was currently bothered by that word.

…*Is that what Sayama-kun started to say?*

She had never mentioned the lie to him, but he was clever.

What would she do if he suddenly asked her about the truth she was hiding?

"…"

As she thought, Shinjou quickly shook her head.

This was no time to be thinking about herself.

"Anyway," began Shinjou as she turned back to the document.

She had always been the type to read. Even on documents, writing had a way of stealing her attention.

A lot of the information was new to her.

She was surprised to see someone who was likely Ooshiro's father listed as Susaou's captain.

The great size of Susaou also surprised her.

Drawn in by those surprises, she read through the entire document without worrying about her food growing cold.

As she did, Sayama gave them the details of his meeting with Director Tsukuyomi of the development department.

After around fifteen minutes, she had finished reading it all.

She took a breath, arranged the papers into a proper stack, and checked everyone else's progress.

Sibyl was rereading it through from the beginning again and again to memorize it, Kazami was flipping back and forth between pages, and Izumo…

"Wh-why is he sleeping with his eyes open, Kazami-san?"

"He thinks it's funny. But look, Kaku, your beer is getting warm. Look."

Even when she tapped his cheek, Izumo did not react.

He was fast asleep, so Kazami gave an exhausted sigh.

"Hey, Kaku. Wake up. C'mon, c'mon. Wake up. C' mon… Wake up!"

"Gah! …Ah, wh-what? Did something just explode next to my face?"

"What are you talking about? Here's your beer."

"O-oh. Thanks, Chisato. But I'm still a bit confused…"

Wow, thought Shinjou as she finished arranging her papers.

"So UCAT has a blank period in their data," muttered Sayama as he arranged his own papers next to her. " Shinjou-kun, could you pass me the Worcestershire sauce ?"

"Oh, sure. You put Worcestershire sauce on tempura?"

"The Tamiya family put soy sauce on everything, so I have been in a bit of a reactionary period ever since I moved to the dorm."

"I see," said Shinjou with a nod.

She had a white doria with soup and salad. Across from her, Sibyl had bread and white stew. Next to Sibyl, Kazami and Izumo both had the yakiniku meal with a beer for Izumo.

Izumo must have noticed her gaze, because he held up the frothy glass.

"Just to be clear, I'm over twenty."

Kazami began eating her meat without saying anything and Sibyl gave a small nod.

"How did the two of you meet?" asked Shinjou out of curiosity.

"You should not ask that, Shinjou-kun. I am sure the two of them have a reason for their violence."

"I appreciate your consideration, Sayama, but what are you trying to say?"

As Kazami smiled and cracked her knuckles, Sayama quickly looked away.

"But why do you ask, Shinjou?"

"Well, I'm a bit curious how you ended up in this relationship," explained Shinjou while thinking about the word "lie" and about Sayama.

Izumo responded by putting down his empty glass and sighing.

"I suppose we can tell you. Right, Chisato?"

"Hmm. Well, if you're okay with it."

"Th-then you'll tell me?"

"Yeah. I'll never forget that day. It was…um…a snowy day…in summer."

"Kazami, ignore that idiot who forgot and tell us," prompted Sayama.

"Okay then…"

As she thought, Sayama gave Baku some of his food.

Kazami gave a small snort and opened her mouth.

"To put it simply, Kaku is the child of a 10th-Gear princess and the president of the Izumo company. The peaceful faction of 10th-Gear was given a reservation in the Kinki region. On his way back there, he was attacked by a group from 6th-Gear who had a grudge against the Izumo family."

"I was injured in the attack and Chisato took me in. She was amazing back then."

"Oh, c'mon, Kaku. I wasn't that amazing."

"You were. You took me to the girls' dorm because I didn't have anywhere to stay."

"Eh? Y-you brought him to your room after just meeting him?"

"No, she threw me in a wax storage room and forgot about me for half a day."

"Wait. Stop that, Kaku!"

"It was the middle of summer, so I almost went insane due to the pain of my injuries, the dehydration, and the closed space filled with vaporized wax. W-wait, Chisato. I'm not lying. It isn't right to raise your fist now. You're trying to suppress the truth!"

Kazami clicked her tongue and Shinjou's mouth hung open.

"Kazami-san…"

"How about we talk about what happened after that?" said Kazami with a smile.

Shinjou quickly nodded.

A glance around the room showed some of the people in the large cafeteria listening in to Izumo and Kazami's story.

Kazami looked around and sat up in her seat a bit.

"It happened two years ago. I was pretty much in the same situation as you, Sayama. Kaku was taken in by UCAT and I tried to bring him something he left behind, but I was caught in a battle with 6th-Gear."

"Boldman was the leader of the 6th-Gear group and they were trying to steal G-Sp and the prototype X-Wi that UCAT was transporting."

"When I fell into the concept space, they were both right in front of me. The truck had rolled on its side."

"Afterwards, 6th-Gear's Concept Core was transferred to UCAT and contained within V-Sw because it was on hand. A lot happened after that, but the Leviathan Road was finished for both 6th and 10th back then."

Shinjou watched the gazes of the three people in front of her and the other UCAT workers surrounding them.

The looks on their faces were perfectly serious and they would nod when she met their gaze.

Next to her, Sayama grabbed some of his food and spoke.

"You look more mature discussing this than you do drinking beer."

"Yeah. You don't usually look that way. I have to rethink my opinion of you. I should probably start calling you Izumo-san," added Shinjou.

"Kaku, they're casually denying your entire personality."

"Are they? I don't really get the details, but feel free to look up to me, Shinjou."

Unsure how to respond, Shinjou turned to Sayama.

"Just speak the words that fill your heart," he told her.

"I-I can't do that. Kazami-san would do something horrible to me."

"Shinjou-sama?" replied Sibyl with a perfectly serious expression. "If I may interrupt, Chisato-sama will make sure you survive."

"I am curious what you were trying to say there," commented Sayama. "Anyway… Kazami, do you ever feel as though you have made a horrible mistake?"

"Yes, but only when I'm with Kaku… Also, I will be returning to my parent's home tonight, so I can go back to a normal life for a short time."

"Oh?" said Sayama.

"Really?" said Shinjou.

"I usually go back on Sundays," she replied. "But it looks like we're going to be busy from now on. After going back today, I can return tomorrow and stay in the dorm for the entire weekend. We're going to the Showa Memorial Park tomorrow, right?"

"I intend to, yes. I have a lot to think about regarding the preliminary negotiations."

"Hm. But is there really a 500 meter humanoid machine in that park? I ran through it a lot for club marathons in middle school."

Kazami's answer did not come from Sayama or the others.

The gently moving air carried in a male voice from behind Sayama.

"It's there," began the voice. "If you go there tomorrow, you will see the truth of Tokyo."

"Eh?" said Shinjou as she turned around.

She turned to the left.

Kazami and the others turned defensively toward the speaker and Izumo could be heard gulping down another beer.

At some point, a man had appeared on the left side of the table.

He was a young man with glasses who wore a lab coat over a work uniform.

He held a laptop under his right arm and a bento box under his left arm.

He turned agreeable black eyes toward them.

"I am Kashima Akio of 2nd-Gear. I am the representative you must negotiate with for the release of 2nd-Gear's concepts."

All of them gulped.

That was the name of the military god Tsukuyomi had told Sayama.

And the document they had just read gave Kashima as the surname of the second in command for the giant humanoid machine.

…It can't be…

But it most likely was. She could sense Sayama growing tense to her right.

…The next Leviathan Road has already begun.

"Now then," said the man named Kashima with a nod. "How shall we carry out this Leviathan Road thing?"

His question was so carefree he seemed to be talking about a game.

Sayama was the one to answer him.

He began with a question.

“You mention the Leviathan Road, but do you have your Concept Core ready?”

“Yes, we know exactly where it is. 2nd-Gear’s Concept Core transformed into the flame dragon Yamata which is currently sealed within the divine sword Totsuka. And Totsuka is stabbed into Susaou’s bridge. But I think you already knew that,” he said while glancing at their documents. “It all comes down to how our negotiations go and whether Yamata will accept you or not.” He took a breath. “That is the biggest issue.”

The nighttime city contained a forest.

The forest spread out as far as the eye could see.

However, a large parking lot bordered a train station to the south of the forest.

The sign in front of the parking lot contained the three words “Showa Memorial Park”.

It was a state-run nature park.

The large clock standing in the parking lot indicated the time was 7:30 PM.

The park had already closed.

The darkness of the night contained only the trees of the forest and a narrow asphalt road.

In the distance of that vast space, a large pool and a rest area could be seen sinking into the darkness.

The sounds of a train suddenly came from the south.

A train was passing through the JR Nishi-Tachikawa Station.

The sound gently filled the artificial forest.

No one should have heard that sound, but someone was listening to it now.

Inside the closed park, two girls stood on the path used during the day as a cycling course.

One was a tall girl. In the darkness, she could be seen standing tall with her black hair tied behind her head and wearing a black shirt and white vest.

She simply stood in the darkness.

Another girl walked quickly up behind her.

This girl was short. She had long black hair and she wore a white blouse and black vest.

Her black eyes looked up at the girl standing before her.

"You walk too fast, Mikoku. I can't keep up."

"This is why I told you not to come, Shino. We still have a long way to go."

Shino sighed at what the tall girl, Mikoku, said.

"But I thought we could go hiking for the first time since visiting 1st-Gear's hideout," said Shino disappointedly.

"I do not think hiking means what you think it means."

"Then what does it mean?"

"Running around the countryside on a sunny Sunday while singing songs and eating the homemade lunch you brought with you. Very sophisticated, isn't it? You can spend a lazy weekend day traversing the mountains singing war songs with nothing but salted rice balls to eat."

"I think your definition is wrong too. By any chance, do you not actually know what it means either?"

"D-do not be ridiculous. It is called 'high-king' because you act like the king of the heights."

"Really?"

"Do not give me that doubting look."

"I wasn't giving you a-… Ow ow! Don't pull on my cheeks!"

Mikoku let go of Shino's cheeks and sighed.

"At any rate, tonight's walk is about sentiment. This time, we will not be contacting 2nd-Gear."

"Is 2nd-Gear really that close to UCAT?"

"Yes. According to Hajji, contacting them holds too great a risk of having our information passed on to UCAT." Mikoku turned around in the direction they were headed. "He also said the people of 2nd-Gear have already become residents of Low-Gear, so they will not join us even if we contact them."

"That's too bad. It was Japanese UCAT's development department that created Team Leviathan's V-Sw and modified G-Sp into G-Sp2."

"That is not all. Totsuka, the Cowling Sword here that sealed Yamata, is also from 2nd-Gear."

Mikoku began walking and heard footsteps following her after a few steps.

"B-but why don't we steal Totsuka? If it's in the concept space here, can't we just sneak in and take it? You could do it, right?"

"This place is under UCAT's control. If I entered the concept space, they might detect the change in string vibration. It would be difficult for me to steal it on my own," explained Mikoku. "Also, the method of releasing Yamata and the method of sealing it are apparently only known by a small number of people in 2nd-Gear. Even if we had Totsuka, we could not do anything with it."

"What is this method of releasing and sealing?"

"I hear it is a word. However, it requires someone with connections to 2nd-Gear's emperor and someone who can give the proper response. But the Army has no influential 2nd-Gear members or anyone who knows that response. …There is nothing we can do."

"I see," said a disappointed voice behind her.

Mikoku smiled bitterly and looked into the sky as she walked.

Stars were visible beyond the tree branches.

"At any rate, we can take it easy tonight. This is just a walk."

"Okay. But what is up ahead?"

"Something sentimental: Susaou and Totsuka, the pinnacle of 2nd-Gear technology."

The man named Kashima brought a chair to the corridor-side edge of the table and sat down. From Sayama's point of view, he sat on the opposite side of Shinjou.

He opened his bento box which contained a homemade Western-style meal.

When Sayama saw the apples peeled to look like rabbits, he concluded this was made by a member of his family.

As he ate, Kashima supplemented what they had learned in their investigation.

He gave a general outline, swallowed a korokke, and finished speaking.

"And as you said, Yamata is still sealed in Totsuka within that concept space."

"It was daring of them to seal it inside Tokyo."

"I heard your grandfather constructed the theory behind that seal," said Kashima.

That sudden revelation about his grandfather's past brought a hand to the left side of Sayama's chest.

And as if responding to his action, his chest began to hurt.

"Kh…"

His groan caused Kashima's eyebrows to move.

He looked toward Sayama and stopped moving his plastic chopsticks.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" he asked frantically.

Shinjou's shoulders trembled and she turned toward Sayama. With the ends of her eyebrows lowered she smiled bitterly while feeling his pain.

He leaned his weight on her outstretched hand and felt some relief.

He could not breathe properly, so he mouthed the words.

Shinjou read his lips and turned toward Kashima.

"He says not to worry about it."

Sayama nodded, felt better, and took a deep breath.

And he straightened up.

Seeing that, Kazami, Izumo, and Sibyl all straightened a bit too.

The fact that all of them had been worried about him made him feel even better.

"When I hear about my relatives' past, I get chest pains ," he explained to Kashima.

"That must be tough. …Your relatives' past, hm?"

Kashima's eyes narrowed as he gave a sigh of relief.

…Does he have some thoughts about his relatives or his own past?

And Sayama had a further thought.

…I suppose everyone has some kind of issue.

"Now, can you tell us what you meant? Earlier, you said 2nd-Gear's Concept Core, aka Yamata, is located in the sword stabbed into the bridge in the head of Susaou. And you said the remaining issues are how we will negotiate and if Yamata will accept us."

But…

"What do you mean by 'accept us'?"

Kashima brushed up his hair with a troubled expression.

"I'll be blunt. 2nd-Gear's Concept Core became Yamata when it lost control in its synchronization with the control system. So if you want to obtain the Concept Core…"

"Yes?"

"You need to obtain Yamata's permission. You must answer Yamata's question and gain its understanding."

"You mean I must negotiate with Yamata?"

"No. You need an intermediary because Yamata does not understand human language. I will ask in your place. As a question, I will speak the word that can control Yamata."

"As a question?" asked Kazami.

"Yamata seeks the answer to a certain question," said Kashima as he turned toward her. "Someone once answered that question, but he was burned to death when Yamata was sealed. In other words, the seal was achieved, but the person who knew the answer died."

"So what is wanted from me is to release Yamata, answer Yamata's question to earn its allegiance, and to not die."

Kashima nodded and Sayama glanced at Baku on his own shoulder.

"I heard Yamata's question in an image of the past."

"What kind of question was it?"

Sayama recalled what he had seen in that dream.

He had heard that ocean of flames beyond the closing gate.

"It was a roar. It sounded like…like the dragon was trying to convey some meaning."

"Did you see the answer?"

"No. As soon as the dragon asked, the 'gate' in the dream closed."

"That's good," said Kashima with a slight smile. " Yamata's question and answer were only known to 2nd-Gear's emperor and chief engineer. …The Kashima family line which created the Cowling Sword Totsuka fell under the latter category. That is why I know."

He grabbed another korokke from his bento and swallowed it.

"So what will you do? If you are going to carry out the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear, what do you plan to give us in exchange for going along with it?"

Everyone at the table froze in place.

Silence fell.

This is where the real issue lies, thought Sayama amid the silence.

Baku must have sensed the change in the atmosphere because he turned toward Shinjou, Kazami, and the others and tilted his head.

Kashima placed his elbows on the table and rested his head in his hands.

"Listen. 2nd-Gear has already become naturalized. We can live in this world without issue. We're perfectly satisfied with the current situation and we don't want to make any waves. In that case, I could ignore your grandfather's will, not bother with the Leviathan Road, and-…"

"It would be easier for you if you unconditionally told me Yamata's question and answer, wouldn't it?"

After a moment, Kashima finally nodded to Sayama's leading words.

"Yes. That would be easier, wouldn't it?"

Mikoku and Shino spoke as they walked through the forest.

"Are we still not at Susaou?"

"Just a bit further. Is this your first time here, Shino?"

"You only just realized?"

Shino sighed and gathered her collar against the growing chill in the air.

"This is my first time coming here. I've seen this place from the train plenty of times, though."

"I see. Well, it is only my second time. Tatsumi dragged me here one night. At the end of March, the park is open until nine for evening flower viewing."

"Hey, I didn't know about that. No fair."

"Do not say that. It happened around seven years ago. You were still young, so I think you were already asleep. Hajji said Tatsumi and I should see another side of this world."

That last sentence caused the ends of Shino's eyebrows to droop a bit.

"Tatsumi-san had some lingering attachment for Low-Gear, didn't she?"

"It was a bit different for her."

"I suppose so," said Shino as she raised her head. "But why are we here today?"

"Didn't I say it was a sentimental walk?"

"Sentimental for what?"

Mikoku wrinkled her brow a bit and looked annoyed. "Susaou is in the concept space here, but we cannot enter that space for fear of being detected."

"Yes?"

"But I think it is important to think on it even if we cannot actually see it." She took a breath. "A battle occurred here. And what happened after that? We must not speak of the past without giving thought to that."

Shino walked up alongside Mikoku and her expression relaxed.

"That's right."

"If you agree, then listen carefully, Shino. With your power, you should clearly understand what happened to this world."

"Yes," said Shino as she walked along and looked among the trees in the darkness.

"…"

After a short silence, she smiled bitterly.

"What is it, Shino?"

"Everyone is asleep: the trees, the flowers, the birds, and the beasts."

"You can tell? Maybe we should have come during the day."

"No. I would rather come during the morning than during the brightness of the day. Everyone would be more energetic then."

"I see." Mikoku quietly looked around. "I wonder if they are aware their homes are under human control." She turned her calm gaze toward the sky. "If not, then it is evidence of Low-Gear's excellent control."

"Isn't being under someone's control a bad thing?"

"Good control is better than bad freedom. But if it had not been for the fighting, this place would never have been created. It would simply be part of nature."

Mikoku saw a small light moving through the night sky. It was an airplane taking off from Yokota Air Base.

"Apparently, Showa Memorial Park was originally an airfield belonging to the old Japanese army."

"You mean Tachikawa Airfield? That was back when propeller planes making loop-the-loops was as advanced as it got."

"Yes. It was taken by the American military after the war and UCAT created a large concept space here. And in 1946, UCAT succeeded in sealing Yamata in that concept space. In '69, the stability of Yamata's seal was confirmed and the American military stopped using it as an airfield." She took a breath. "In '75, the higher ups of

Japan made a certain decision while celebrating the 50th year of Emperor Showa's reign. For the sake of the surviving Low-Gear and the destroyed Gear, they decided to create a park to preserve the concept space in which Yamata was sealed."

"And that park…?"

"Yes. In '77, the American military made great progress in their investigation and development toward returning Tachikawa Airfield. By '83, the airfield had become a large nature park that even had hills. It had water, it had greenery, it was carefully maintained, and it had become a place for the survivors to enjoy their life without realizing the truth. This is essentially a giant memorial for the dead."

The forest opened up and a lake could be seen. The lake had an area for boarding boats and sleeping ducks could be seen floating on the water.

Mikoku stopped.

"This is the place," she said and took a breath. "Susaou is here."

"What will you do?" asked Kashima as a small sound rang out.

Everyone saw Izumo place his empty glass on the table.

The sounds of muttering voices and moving chairs filled the cafeteria.

However, Sayama and the others at the table created the silence of thought and stillness.

"What will you do?" asked Kashima again.

…If I asked for Yamata's question and answer here, would he tell me?

Sayama decided this was a test.

He would be given his answer, but if he did that…

…This Kashima would give up on me.

He was unlikely to gain the man's trust that way.

Sayama looked toward Kashima's work uniform and laptop and he nodded internally.

Engineers took pride in their work.

He could not just ask him.

But he could not simply negotiate for the answer. 2nd-Gear was satisfied with their situation.

…To think about this, do I have to face 2nd-Gear?

Sayama folded his arms as he thought.

And he suddenly sensed a presence next to him.

"…!"

He turned and saw a man sitting in the empty chair next to him. The man had short hair dyed blond, wore a white combat coat over a thin frame, and had already finished half a bowl of soba.

He did not look toward Sayama. He used a Chinese spoon to carry an egg to this mouth, slowly brought the bowl to his mouth, and slurped at the broth.

That was when Kazami noticed him.

"Wha-…?"

Izumo, Shinjou, and Sibyl all noticed him in turn and quickly faced him.

However, the man loudly slurping the broth did not look at them.

As they stared at him, Kashima spoke up.

"Stop using the Art of Walking, Atsuta."

The man named Atsuta finished slurping about half of the broth and raised his head from the bowl.

He looked directly at Sayama, bent his black eyes, and turned to Kashima.

"Hey, Kashima." His breath smelled of tuna. "No matter what anyone else may say, you can't let this end with nothing more than words."

Sayama frowned.

He was half-surprised and half-annoyed that there were people like this in 2nd-Gear.

"That is not for you to decide," he said.

"Ah," said Kazami an instant later.

What is it? he wondered, but he had his answer almost immediately.

The chopsticks in Atsuta's hand held a familiar object.

It was Baku.

While still looking at Sayama, Atsuta brought Baku over to the bowl.

"Splash."

He dropped the creature. He held the chopsticks in his fist and stirred the broth to form a whirlpool.

"What are you gonna do, kid? Are you just gonna let me do this to your pet?"

As Atsuta spoke, Baku spun quickly around in the bowl. But once he arrived at the center of the whirlpool, he raised his front legs and began to rotate like a ballerina.

Sayama tilted his head.

"Is there something wrong with what you are doing?"

Atsuta frowned and looked down at Baku.

"Dammit, he looks like he's having fun…"

"He always lives in the moment, so everything is enjoyable for him. He is an excitable masochist."

That was when Shinjou began to tremble.

"Wh-why are you trying to smooth this over, Sayama-kun!? He's being mean to him, so you have to take him back!"

The panic in her voice told Sayama that she had only just noticed Baku.

He also realized another fact.

…Is this the same technique Director Tsukuyomi and Diana showed me?

The instant that thought came to him, he took action.

He stuck his right hand into Atsuta's bowl.

"…"

It was a sudden motion. He had no other choice.

He used a surprise attack before the man could take action outside of his perception.

His hand knocked away the Chinese spoon in the bowl , grabbed Baku, and sent the soba broth splashing into the air.

An instant later, Atsuta showed off his teeth in a smile.

"Interesting."

At the same moment, the bowl Sayama's hand was supposedly inside of was lying discarded on the floor.

Baku had supposedly been in his right hand, but the creature was gone.

He looked up and saw Baku held between Atsuta's chopsticks.

Atsuta smiled and held Baku up in the air.

"Well?"

Sayama looked down at his right hand. The sleeve of his suit was stained brown and had steam rising from it.

"I see. You can remove something from my perception for just an instant."

"You sure are calm."

"Of course I am. My calm rivals the heavens in size," said Sayama with a smile. "And in my calm, I have something to kindly tell you: look at the bowl you discarded."

"What?"

With Baku still in his chopsticks, Atsuta looked down.

The bowl lay on the tiled floor with its broth spilled around it. However, one thing was missing.

"You don't mean…" muttered Atsuta.

The missing object fell from above.

It was the Chinese spoon.

"I did not stick my hand in the bowl so strongly for no reason."

The Chinese spoon had been knocked away by Sayama's hand earlier and now it fell and struck the chopsticks Atsuta held.

The slight impact on the chopsticks caused the man to look down.

This created an opening.

In the next instant, Sayama knocked Baku from the chopsticks with his right hand.

He knocked the creature behind him and he took a step toward Atsuta to keep the man from pursuing the creature.

Atsuta glanced toward Baku and smiled bitterly.

"Where are you knocking him? The poor thing's gonna fall on the table."

"No need to worry. I have outdone you in every way."

As Sayama spoke, he heard someone catch Baku behind him.

Sayama turned around and checked who had caught the creature.

“Whoops.”

As he thought, it was Kashima. He held Baku with an exasperated look.

“Sorry about the trouble my friend is causing. Let me clean up for you. I can wash your suit too,” he said with a sigh. He then turned to Atsuta. “Okay, why are you here?”

“I came to see how much it took for these kids to get mad.”

Hearing that, Sayama suddenly turned toward Kashima.

He knew what this kind of provocation meant.

“2nd-Gear is having difficulty deciding how to negotiate with us, isn’t it?”

"Sadly, yes." Kashima wiped Baku off with the sleeve of his lab coat, placed him on the table, and shrugged. " My name, Kashima, is the name of 2nd-Gear's strongest military god and the name of a swordsmith family. But I don't look it, do I? …That's the situation. Most of 2nd-Gear can no longer tell if they really are from 2nd-Gear."

Someone raised their voice at that.

"That isn't true!"

It was Atsuta.

Kashima's words and Atsuta's shout caused Shinjou to gulp.

"It may be the case for most of 2nd-Gear, but you're just hiding your pow-…"

He only made it that far.

Atsuta swallowed his words and gathered his strength as if resisting something.

Shinjou thought about Kashima based on what Atsuta had said.

…He's hiding his power? Why?

She could find no answer to that internal question.

But she did know one thing.

…This Atsuta person sees Kashima-san as more powerful than him.

Atsuta had just shown them his skill.

He had used his Art of Walking to leave their perception.

When Diana had used it in the training room, it had been limited to one person, but that was not the case with Atsuta.

It was possible he could leave the perceptions of every single person in the cafeteria.

Kazami and Izumo were placed on the vanguard of the Leviathan Road, but they had not been able to perceive him. Neither had Sayama.

Someone that powerful viewed Kashima as higher than him.

…But Kashima-san said he can't tell if he's from 2nd-Gear.

Why?

Why was he unable to recognize the power he had?

She asked the question to herself.

And she found an answer.

…Because of a lie.

The words she had spoken to Ooshiro filled her chest.

And she spoke different words now.

"Kashima-san… Are you telling some kind of lie?"

Her voice filled the cafeteria.

But she did not hesitate.

She looked at both Atsuta and Kashima and asked the question as if she were asking it to herself.

"And because of that lie, you can't think of yourself as a person of 2nd-Gear?"

Her words received two things in reply.

The first was silence.

"Don't act like you know what you're talking about!!"

The second was Atsuta's shout.

As he took an offensive stance, someone else moved in response.

It was Izumo.

Mikoku looked at the stars reflected in the water's surface.

The night wind crossed the artificial lake and cut past her. It continued on to the forest behind her and caused the leaves to rustle.

She suddenly heard something other than the sounds of nature.

It was a song. Specifically, the hymn Silent Night.

“Silent night, holy night.”

She turned toward the clear voice which did not destroy the stillness surrounding her and saw Shino with her head lowered and her small mouth opened.

She was really only singing to herself as she distinctly stated the words.

The warm wind of that spring night carried her voice into the sky.

“Promised to spare all mankind.

Promised to spare all mankind.”

The song came to an end and Shino raised her head.

Mikoku saw Shino’s black eyes look at the water surface.

Her slender hand reached toward Mikoku.

She grabbed Mikoku’s left sleeve from behind. The weak tug caused Mikoku to gasp slightly.

"Can you tell?"

"Yes, I can. Susaou is definitely here."

Mikoku nodded and turned back to the still water. The water was the same color as the night sky above and not a single ripple could be seen.

"This lake was placed in the same location as Susaou to reinforce the meaning of restraining the flame dragon Yamata. I have heard a lake was also placed around Susaou inside the concept space."

Shino looked around the area.

They were surrounded by the artificial forest and lake.

"I've heard 2nd-Gear was a biosphere. This place is the same, isn't it?"

"This is a location Low-Gear obtained with many sacrifices. It is a peaceful place, but ironically they cannot view something as peaceful without creating it artificially ."

"…"

"We can only go this far, but remember how this peaceful atmosphere made you feel. No matter what may have happened here, this is a nice place to be in the present."

"Yes, it is," agreed Shino and Mikoku answered with a nod.

"But it is disappointing that we cannot bring the residents of 2nd-Gear into our Army."

"Interpersonal relationships are hard. The people of 1st-Gear wouldn't get along with us either."

"Well, Hajji likes to show off a little too much. I think part of him enjoys making people wary of him. We need to make sure he restrains himself."

The grip on her sleeve strengthened.

"I thought you had died."

It took Mikoku a few seconds to answer.

"Oh, you mean when Fafnir Custom shot me. Why are you bringing that up now?"

"I thought you had died," she repeated in the exact same tone of voice.

"I will not die, so do not worry, Shino."

Mikoku raised the hand Shino was grabbing onto.

Her left fingers had the slight firmness of a swordsman and she placed that hand on Shino's head.

She gave a bitter laugh when Shino did not let go of her sleeve.

"Wh-what's so funny?"

"It looks like you grabbed my hand and made me rub your head."

Shino opened her eyes a bit, blushed, and let go.

Mikoku ran her hand through Shino's hair and stroked her head. Strength left her eyebrows.

"How about you grow up a little?"

"That isn't something you can do just because you want to."

Shino brought a hand up from her chest to her neck and reached under her collar.

She had a metal chain around her neck. She grabbed the chain with her fingernail and lifted up the decoration attached to it.

It was a small blue stone. She sighed as she looked at the faint light coming from it.

"I should get mine embedded inside my body like yours."

"Shino."

That word stopped Shino from continuing.

"The time will eventually come when you will cast something aside. You will not have it taken. You will cast it aside."

"…"

"After all, we are carrying too many things for the sake of every world," said Mikoku. "But the more one casts

aside, the happier it shows they were. And they will gain just as much happiness later. So do not try to make everything yours."

"But that's so vague…"

"That may be, but it is clear you possess many things. At the very least, you have more than I do."

Mikoku lightly struck Shino's head with her palm two or three times. The ends of her eyebrows lowered as she smiled.

"Well, spending all your time thinking about these philosophical questions will only make you dumber. … How about doing an adult job for once?"

"Eh?" said Shino as she raised her head. She was blushing and she intertwined her fingers and rubbed them together. "U-um, when you say an adult job…um… Do you mean something i-indecent?"

"No. You should stop reading the newspapers the people who maintain Alex read."

"Eh? But I thought all division and department chiefs are perverted people and the victim is always the woman sub-chief below them."

"That only happens in certain types of novels. By the way, the real prize is the handsome man who works as their subordinate."

"See, you read them too."

"Crap," muttered Mikoku before lightly striking Shino 's head with her palm a few times.

"Ah…ow… S-stop trying to avoid the issue."

"Listen, Shino. 2nd-Gear will not join us, but there is still something we must do."

Shino stopped the hand she had been using to guard her head.

"Something we must do? Um, you mean we have a job that requires something…indecent?"

"Stop thinking about perverted old men. Do you really think any guy is interested in a child like you?"

"The newspaper said there are a lot of guys like that lately."

"Then do you want to try doing a job with them?"

Shino frantically shook her head and Mikoku nodded.

"Good. I am well aware you have romantic shoujo manga hidden under your bed, you know? Also, you should really stop secretly setting up the TV to record yakuza movies just because Hajji and I do not know how. …Hm? What is it? Why are you blushing so much?"

"Th-that's a violation of privacy! And don't act like you don't secretly read magazines like Monthly How to Hit the Vitals. If there's nothing wrong with that, then why do you hide it?"

"That is my kindness as an older sister. If you saw this month's article on hitting the sweet spot below the nose, you would faint."

"Uuh…" groaned Shino as she flinched back just from hearing the title.

Mikoku folded her arms and sighed.

"At any rate, there is something we must do. I will suggest it to Hajji tomorrow."

Shino looked surprised to hear that.

"Wh-what is it? Is it really that important?"

"Yes," began Mikoku. "We will take some time off."

"Now then," said Izumo as he stood up.

Atsuta turned to look at him.

"Hah. What is it, rich boy? Are you gonna use your influence and money to have a servant knock me away so you can get back to drinking beer with your mistress? You must have it nice. Well? Are you gonna do it?"

"I don't know," was all Izumo said before turning to Sayama. "Sayama, take Shinjou and move back. I'll handle this. Also…"

He held his hand to the side at head height and spoke casually.

"Just for fun, I'm gonna call in my weapon."

"Oh?"

Atsuta nodded and stuck a hand in his right pocket.

Sayama grabbed Baku from the table, wrapped an arm around Shinjou's shoulders, and took a step back.

At the same time, Kashima spoke up. His eyebrows were raised slightly.

"Atsuta."

"Give me a few seconds. This should make for some light recreation." He bared his teeth in a smile. "6th-Gear 's V-Sw, hm? I always wanted to try my hand against it. Are you gonna use the power of the Concept Core to charge at me and create a crater? Sounds like fun." He suddenly turned toward someone next to Izumo. "Don't sneak around, mistress! If you want to call in your weapon too, do it! One kid wouldn't be enough to handle me anyway!"

Atsuta saw Kazami tightly close her mouth and stand. At some point, armbands had appeared on her arms. She walked up to Izumo.

"Kaku."

She placed a hand on his chin and pulled his head down.

"…"

Their lips met.

After three seconds, they parted and she raised her hand just like his.

"I'm not his mistress. Are you completely blind? I'll make you sorry you ever said that."

The crowd that had formed let out a cheer and Izumo nodded.

"And if you still can't tell she isn't my mistress, we'll do something even more-…gwoh!"

"Oh, sorry. My elbow slipped. I hit your solar plexus? Sorry, Kaku."

The crowd let out a low groan.

Atsuta on the other hand was grinning the same as before.

He seemed to be enjoying the prospect of fighting two people who owned a concept weapon powered by a Concept Core.

And he spoke in a tone that matched his expression.

“Hah. Let me tell you one thing. I use the combat Art of Walking passed down by 2nd-Gear. Most major members of 2nd-Gear or powerful members of UCAT can use it.”

And…

“See it and go to hell.”

With those words, everyone in the cafeteria lost sight of Atsuta.

Izumo and Kazami’s eyes narrowed because they could not see him either.

“!”

They opened their mouths to call the names of their weapons.

Everything was about to move.

But someone brought it all to a stop.

“Let’s leave it at that,” said Kashima with a troubled expression.

Izumo, Kazami, and Atsuta faced each other in the cafeteria.

And Kashima had appeared between them at some point.

Plus, his right hand held Atsuta’s face.

“You overcame the Art of Walking and grabbed his head,” muttered Kazami blankly.

Everyone who understood what that meant gasped.

However, Kashima did not nod. His shoulders drooped and he removed his hand from Atsuta’s face.

"Sorry, Atsuta. I know you're just trying to help me in your own way."

He turned toward Kazami and Izumo and then turned toward Sayama and Shinjou.

"Sorry. We didn't really settle anything here."

"I am just glad to see the two of you get along so well. But…what should we do about the Leviathan Road?"

"Well…" Kashima appeared troubled. "I'd appreciate it if you gave me some time. And once I seriously make up my mind about something, I want you to give me your answer. Is that enough for now?"

Sayama narrowed his eyes and spoke in a cautious voice.

"Do I only have to wait?"

"Good question." Kashima glanced at Shinjou and seemed to choose his words carefully. "I would like it if you thought some on what she said about a 'lie'. Whatever I decide, I am sure it will come from there. I do not want to lose what is important to me."

That last statement caused Atsuta to clench his teeth.

“It sounds to me like you’ve already made up your mind.”

Kashima did not respond.

And so Sayama nodded.

“Testament, I suppose I should say. To be honest, I do not think I could stand simply waiting either. I want to give various issues some thought so I can properly face 2nd-Gear.”

“Properly face 2nd-Gear?” asked Kashima.

“Yes,” replied Sayama with a nod. He spoke slowly as if driving the words into himself. “Right now, I see the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear as something I need in order to face the other Gears and everything else I must face.”

Those words brought a slight look of surprise to Kashima’s face.

But he quickly brought back a calm expression and gave his thoughts.

"You are…a brave person."

"No, I only just now decided this."

Kashima smiled bitterly.

Sayama smiled back, swung up his left forearm, and looked across everyone there.

"Then Team Leviathan will once more look into 2nd-Gear's history and the sealing of Yamata. That is the first step to seeing you properly. If possible, I hope tomorrow's preliminary negotiations will allow us to face each other from a good position."

"Yes. It may not be me in that good position you mentioned, but I will say testament for now," said Kashima with a smile.

But then…

"Oh, my? Have things been settled? Or…"

They heard a sudden female voice.

They all turned toward the cafeteria entrance. An elderly woman leaned against the large open door.

It was Tsukuyomi.

With a lab coat over her slender body, she brushed her semi-long graying hair into place with a hand and walked forward.

Atsuta took a step back and she sighed.

The eyebrows above her narrow eyes did not rise.

“The negotiations have yet to begin, so let’s leave it at that, you naughty children.” She turned toward Sayama. “I apologize that we have so many fools with us. I will give him a pay cut, so please forgive him. That will suffice, won’t it?”

Chapter 10: A Call for False Testimony

Chapter 10

“A Call for False Testimony”

It only becomes a lie once you look at the other person
Until then, it is a secret
It is a truth waiting for you to let it bloom

It only becomes a lie once you look at the other person

Until then, it is a secret

It is a truth waiting for you to let it bloom

Sayama and Shinjou were inside the locker room in front of the training room.

Sayama was changing into a new shirt on the bench near the room's exit.

He had used the authority of Team Leviathan to reserve the room for a short time. Almost no one was waiting to use the training room that late, so he had been given permission to use it for about half an hour.

Shinjou sat to his left, drying Baku with a towel.

Baku glared at Shinjou with narrowed eyes.

"Does the soap smell bad? Sorry."

She smiled bitterly and turned the troubled expression toward Sayama.

However, she stopped smiling there.

She let out a sigh, let her shoulders droop, and hung her head down.

And she did not look back up.

I feel like I have seen this scene a lot today, thought Sayama as he watched Shinjou's lowered head.

Was there anything he could get across to Setsu or Sadame?

His thoughts were suddenly cut off by a muttered word and a sigh escaping Shinjou's mouth.

"…Sorry."

"What are you apologizing for?" asked Sayama with a tilt of the head.

He had a feeling he understood why she was apologizing. However…

"2nd-Gear has an ability we cannot handle, but is there more to it than that?"

Shinjou would not apologize for a situation in which no one had been able to do anything.

Shinjou seemed to grasp what he meant because she shook her head.

"There is that, but that isn't quite what I meant. It was my question to Kashima-san that got Atsuta-san so worked up, remember?" She sighed. "I wasn't thinking. And I couldn't do anything afterwards."

"You will be able to do something eventually. How about I bring you to my teacher sometime soon?"

"Eh?"

Shinjou looked up with a confused look and Sayama smiled back.

"The Hiba Dojo is where I learned marital arts. My teacher there was a friend of my grandfather. If you go, you will definitely receive a nice beating, so I need to bring a present to cheer you up afterwards."

Sayama suddenly remembered old times.

That had definitely been someone he was no match for whatsoever.

He was a short old man and his most noticeable feature was his red right eye.

I wonder if he is still doing well, he thought. *He is probably fine.*

Unlike his grandfather, that old man ran through the mountains every day.

"But Hiba-sensei can be pretty stubborn, so I doubt he will even give us a hint. But I bet he could reproduce that Art of Walking after only hearing a description of it."

"I see," said Shinjou with an impressed nod.

She suddenly turned toward Sayama's left arm.

Sayama followed her gaze toward the white shirt sleeve covering his arm.

The wound below that sleeve was almost completely healed.

"Setsu will be leaving soon, won't he?" asked Shinjou while closing her eyes a bit.

It was an unexpected question, but Sayama managed to remain expressionless.

The question itself bothered him, but so did the quiet tone with which she gave it.

…I need to distract her with some carefree chatter before this grows too dark.

But what topic should he use?

Driven by a sense of duty, he tried to come up with something.

Would the cafeteria's new menu item, the watermelon ramen, work? Or perhaps how Kazami naturally knocked Izumo off of the second floor during a rehearsal for the student band? No, a cheerful topic related to Shinjou Setsu would work. He could tell her how much he admired Setsu's butt.

…There are too many options!

"S-Sayama-kun? You look really conflicted about something."

"It is nothing to worry about, Shinjou-kun. I am always giving everything great thought."

"In other words, you always overthink everything and end up choosing something weird?"

He had a feeling the conversation was veering off track .

Why is that? he wondered.

For the moment, he decided to force it back on track, so he cleared his throat and spoke.

"But I will still be able to see Setsu-kun even after he leaves, won't I?"

"Eh?"

His question made Shinjou tremble.

He continued speaking to make sure she understood what he meant.

"If you and Setsu-kun both live in the place UCAT prepared for you, I could always visit him after training."

"Y-you shouldn't do that," insisted Shinjou with her head still lowered.

Sayama tilted his head a bit.

"Why are you-…"

He began to say "the one to decide that", but he stopped.

…UCAT looks after these Shinjou siblings in a lot of ways.

Wondering if there was a reason for that, Sayama expressed himself with different words.

"How about we let Setsu-kun decide that?"

"This may not be the best way to put it, but… Can't you trust what I tell you?"

"That is not what I mean. If it is possible to respect the wishes of Setsu-kun himself, that is what I wish to do."

"…"

"Or do you believe that I do not trust you?"

"I do."

"But I do trust you."

"Th-then if I told you I have an incurable heart disease, you would believe me?"

"I would."

"R-really!?"

"Yes. And in that case, I would have a doctor teach me an excellent heart massage method so I could perform the massage myself."

"Why are groping the air while speaking so seriously? " she shouted.

Silence followed until she let out another sigh.

But she must have felt the silence was her own fault because she spoke up while continuing to dry off Baku.

"U-um, Sayama-kun? You are really, really important to me. I mean it."

"How important?"

"More than Ooshiro-san."

"That does not seem very important to me…"

"Um, then, to be blunt… You're second only to the parents I never knew."

"I see. Thank you."

"Ah, no. Don't thank me." Shinjou kept her head lowered but stopped moving the towel. "But, um, Sayama-kun?"

"What is it?"

She bit her lower lip, her face reddened, and she averted her gaze.

"I don't want you to trust me too much…"

Sayama did not ask why.

Shinjou remained silent as she waited for him to ask, but then she shook her head.

The way she trembled told Sayama she had made up her mind.

"Remember what I asked Kashima-san just now?" she finally asked. "I asked him if he could not think of himself as a person of 2nd-Gear because he was telling a lie. I was kind of asking that question to myself." She took a breath. "I am lying to you, Sayama-kun."

Izumo and Kazami travelled south through Okutama at night.

They rode an old black Kawasaki motorcycle through the wind on their way to Akigawa.

Izumo sat straight as he calmly drove the motorcycle and Kazami clung loosely to his back. Neither of them was wearing a helmet. Their helmets were shaking where they hung next to each other on the side. They wore something else instead.

"Defensive philosopher's stones."

Kazami suddenly looked down at the anklet currently worn on her left arm. It had a small blue stone attached.

"These philosopher's stones are stronger than a helmet , but are you sure this isn't mixing our private lives with work?"

"Director Tsukuyomi gave them out to everyone, so I don't see anything wrong with it. And we do get in fights sometimes."

"These were meant to keep us quiet about what happened, but I wonder what Sayama will do. He isn't the type to forgive someone just because they gave him something."

"No, he isn't," agreed Izumo. "Left turn coming up."

It was a tight corner. Kazami looked past Izumo's large back and toward the darkness of the night beyond.

Oh, this is the corner we always take like this, she thought as her short hair blew to the right and she leaned her body.

She leaned against Izumo's back while listening to a mountain stream to the left.

"Will you take me home?"

"Sure. I think your dad really likes me."

"My mom was amazed when the two of you ate and drank like crazy two weeks ago."

"He challenged me, so I couldn't just back down. It was like that two years ago as well."

"Back then, he was trying to eliminate the man he thought was kidnapping his daughter. He did pretty well for an event planner."

"Yeah, it ended up with a double KO thanks to a self-destructive full nelson off the second story balcony. Ha ha ha. Your dad's the only normal person to ever hurt me."

"My mom videotaped it and still shows it to us. She added in a Cantonese song."

"Oh?" he replied while ending the motorcycle's tilt.

The wind blew over his back and Kazami sighed into it .

"My dad just sees you as a good drinking buddy…"

"Doesn't he do a lot of drinking in his event planning job?"

"I think he likes you because he can drink without it being related to work."

"Is that how it works? Come to think of it, we always talk about you while drinking."

"Wait. You always get really worked up, so what exactly do you say? Be honest."

"Needless to say, we praise you as a wonderful person who-…ow ow ow! N-not the spine!"

"Shut up. I've heard a bit of what you say. You talk about how long I bathed with my parents and things like that."

"Yeah, it was until the second year of middle school, right? Your dad said he's been lonely without you in there with him, so how about I take a photo for him? There shouldn't be anyone in Sunflower's women's bath this late, so-… Agh! Stop, stop! Are you trying to turn this into a test of the philosopher's stones, Chisato!?"

With a sigh, Kazami loosened the arms strangling him.

She sat up a bit to look over his shoulder.

Ahead, she saw the night sky and the street lights which cut it off here and there.

The darkness of the forest filled their surroundings and the sounds of a stream could be heard down below.

Kazami lowered the hands around Izumo's neck and brought them to his chest.

"What do you think would have happened if we had actually fought in the cafeteria?" she asked.

"We'd have lost."

"You think so too?"

"But you saw Sayama, right? He didn't do anything himself and he didn't stop us. If the leader of the Leviathan Road does that, it means he's telling us to fight ," said Izumo. "I think I know what he's thinking. He thinks we need some kind of discord if we're going to gain anything when everyone is already satisfied."

"And Shinjou didn't stop him despite being his usual stopper. I hope she's okay. She said she would go with

Sayama afterwards, but I think she's worrying about something."

"Shinjou, hm? To be honest, there's something about her I just don't get."

"I don't like talking behind people's backs, but I know what you mean. Both Sadame and Setsu seem somehow distanced from us. Maybe it's just because they always stick with Sayama."

"There has to be a reason for it and Sayama has to be the one approaching that reason."

"You sure sound certain."

"That's because I am," said Izumo with a nod. "Two years ago when you took me in, I only wanted to talk with you. I think there is only ever one person who will truly understand you."

"Eh?" said Kazami, but she had no real reply for what he had said.

She was troubled.

She wanted to say something about understanding him, but she could not come up with anything to say.

Instead, she loosely embraced his chest from behind.

She heard him speak in response.

"Anyway, let's get home. Tomorrow is when it truly begins. After all, we didn't get Yamata's question or answer from Kashima today," he said. "We'll be turning right to cross the mountain now."

The motorcycle tilted and the wind changed. The wind which had gathered at the bottom of the mountain became a wind falling down from the sky.

Kazami frowned at a sudden scent in the wind.

"We learned nothing and now it's going to rain."

Sayama replied to Shinjou with a question.

"And what is this lie?"

"Do I have to tell you?"

Her expression and tone were both tinged with fear.

She seemed to be telling him not to rush her, so Sayama swallowed his words.

And finally…

…*Are these words better?*

"What kind of lie is it?" he asked instead.

Shinjou's shoulders relaxed and she seemed to think about what to say.

"Um, it's kind of hard to say, but this lie allows me to be with you."

And…

"Without this lie, everyone would look at me weird and treat me like a treasure. That's how it has always worked with people who know about my lie. So…"

"So you think I will do the same?"

Shinjou nodded.

"Setsu is…the same," she said.

"I see," he replied with a nod.

…So they do have a lie.

This was something he had to face.

That realization allowed him to give a sigh of relief.

…But what kind of lie is it?

As he thought, Sayama suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, right."

"Eh?"

He had just recently come up with a guess concerning Shinjou's lie.

This is an excellent opportunity, he thought. *I may be able to solve everything related to Shinjou's "lie".*

"Shinjou-kun. There is something I wish to check. May I?"

"Eh? Um, sure."

She looked doubtful, but she gave him permission.

"Please take off your clothes," instructed Sayama with a smile.

"What!?"

Sayama nodded.

"I have a certain question which may be related to your lie."

"Wh-what? …O-okay. Sayama-kun, I need you to calm down."

"I am always perfectly calm."

"Yes, yes, of course. But please take a deep breath and let it out. …Okay, now before you suddenly begin doing something, could you tell me what you're thinking?"

Sayama confidently answered her roundabout question.

"Shinjou Sadame-kun, you are actually Shinjou Setsu-kun dressed as a girl."

When she heard that, Shinjou gasped for an instant but then frowned, partially closed her eyes, and looked away .

"Ahh… What is wrong with this person?"

"Ha ha ha. No need to be shy. Many people enjoy things considered out of the ordinary."

"That isn't what I meant." With her head lowered, Shinjou placed a hand on Sayama's shoulder. "My lie isn't that simple. And listen closely: I, Sadame, am a girl."

"You are?"

"Can't you tell just by looking at me?"

"Then I shall take a look."

"Eh? W-wait!"

Shinjou stood up in order to back away, but her skirt fell from her waist.

“H-huh? Wait, when did that happen!?”

“When you gave me permission earlier, I unfastened the clasp. My grandfather taught me how to do that.”

Sayama picked up the skirt and looked up at Shinjou from the bench.

“You will let me see, won’t you?”

“Wait… Wait just a second. Have we entered the Sayama Zone?”

“What kind of nonsense is that? There is no such thing.”

With a look of understanding, Shinjou turned to the side.

“They do say people never realize where it is they live …”

“Why are you bringing up a philosophical issue?”

"I'm not."

Shinjou clenched both her fists and held them up, but her shirt suddenly opened and her bra fell down.

"Eh? What? H-how did you do that!?"

"My grandfather's technique lets one remove all of a woman's clothing in an instant. I am glad you were wearing a front-hook bra."

"I-is that how it works?"

"Yes. Removing rear-hook ones from the front is difficult, so I practiced it with my grandfather. One summer night during my first year of middle school, he wore nothing but a pair of boxer briefs and a rear-hook bra. We worked up quite a sweat training. …We even got our legs tangled together and fell to the tatami mats together."

"An old man wearing women's underwear was rolling around with a young boy during a summer night…?"

"Heh heh heh. Ryouko rushed in when she heard the noise and she would not speak to me for three days afterwards."

"Enough strange stories about your past. Would you please give me back my skirt?"

"Of course. But will you let me see first?"

Shinjou's expression froze over.

"S-Sayama-kun? Um, a thought just occurred to me… Are you even listening to what I say?"

"Of course I am. But checking on this comes first."

"I-I already told you! I'm a girl and that isn't my lie."

"But you gave me permission earlier."

"You didn't say what you were going to do! I-I trusted you!"

Sayama nodded.

"And I want you to continue trusting me. Before I arrive at your lie, I want to clear the doubt in my mind. I want to face you properly."

"Face me?" muttered Shinjou as the ends of her eyebrows lowered. "C-can I really trust you?"

"Have I ever betrayed you?"

"If you count unexpected actions, I can think of countless times…"

Shinjou lowered her head, blushed, and gave a troubled look.

"You won't do anything weird? …No, saying that is meaningless here, isn't it? Isn't it? So, um, uh…" She wrapped her arms around her chest and her disheveled shirt. "Y-you can't take off any more than this."

"I see. So you will be designating the method I use. Understood."

Shinjou gave a sigh of relief and stuck Baku in the breast pocket of her shirt.

"But how are you going to check that I'm a girl? I won' t show you any more than this."

"And that leaves touching as my only option."

"You mean like touch gently with your fingertips?'

"Yes, like a nice firm squeeze."

"That's completely different! …Listen. You can only use your fingers and palm and you can only touch."

Shinjou's tone was firm, but her step forward was timid.

"And I wouldn't let anyone else do this."

With a troubled look, Shinjou raised her shirt collar and slid her bra to the side.

Her breasts were now bared within the shirt.

A bit of sweat was visible on those round mounds of flesh and they moved up and down with her shoulders as she breathed.

With the same trouble look, she held her chest out toward him a bit.

"Y-you can touch now."

Sayama nodded and reached out his hands.

His right arm gently embraced her back, his cheek and ear pressed against her chest, and his left hand…

"Eh? W-wait! You can't stick your hand between my legs!"

"You are the one that said I could touch you."

"But…" said Shinjou as he listened her pulse through her skin.

"Please be quiet. I want to hear your pulse."

What he heard was a bit faster than what he had heard before, but it was the same.

Just as before, he felt her body heat and a bit of sweat on his cheek. Shinjou's sweet breaths were the same as well.

However, they also resembled what he had sensed from Shinjou Setsu.

And so he turned his focus to his left hand.

That hand was placed between Shinjou's legs. His fingers and palm felt a certain sensation, warmth, and texture.

"Ah… Wait…"

Sayama gave no response to her voice and trembling. With the term "investigation stability" in the back of his mind, he moved his right hand which was behind her back. He grabbed her hands which were wandering through the air and placed them on his own back.

"Sayama-kun…"

Shinjou was now embracing him with both arms. That was for the best.

He then turned his attention back to what he felt with his left hand.

…It is not there?

Something that a boy should have had was not present .

Sayama recalled the events at the public bath about a month before.

The sensation of gently grabbing Shinjou Setsu returned to his hand. But in the present…

…It is not there? Odd. It should be…

"Nn… W-wait! Not so strong…"

Shinjou's hips squirmed. She pressed her legs together to keep him from moving his hand any more.

"U-um, Sayama-kun. Is that enough? You can tell, right?"

He heard her question reverberate through the flesh of her chest.

To Sayama's astonishment, he was forced to accept a certain fact: it was definitely not there.

…This cannot be. My prediction should not have been wrong.

He expressed that thought with a question.

"Shinjou-kun, something is odd. But…I am not sure what."

"It's you!!"

Sayama ignored her and continued to think.

…In that case, what is her lie?

He had confirmed that Shinjou Sadame was indeed a girl.

"Ah, not so hard…"

But Shinjou Setsu had certainly been a boy when he had checked previously.

"Please, you shouldn't do this. This isn't a normal thing to do…"

Had he jumped to an erroneous conclusion?

"P-please take your hand out from between my legs… Are you even listening?"

"Hmm," groaned Sayama.

"What did that groan mean? Did you find something strange? Is it about my body…or about your sanity?"

"Mh? What is with these rude comments, Shinjou-kun ?"

"Oh, you've come back to your senses. Th-then can you remove your left hand?"

Sayama looked forward when he heard her hesitant request.

His hand was in between her thighs and her underwear was slid a bit to the side.

Seeing that, he realized a certain fact: his investigation was already over.

"Shinjou-kun, how long do you intend to hold my hand between your thighs? …Gwoh!"

"Wh-whose fault do you think that is!?"

"Heh…heh heh heh. Holding my head and jabbing me with your knee? Not bad."

Shinjou did not remove the arms wrapped around him , so he tried to remove them himself.

“No. You’re going to do something weird again. Don’t move. If you do, you get the knee again.”

“Calm down, Shinjou-kun.”

“S-say something that will calm me down.”

“Very well,” said Sayama with a nod. “The other night on the way up to my bed on the top bunk, I happened to glance down where Setsu-kun was sleeping. I was so distracted by his ass that I stubbed my little toe on the ladder quite hard.”

“Wah! Don’t say something that will make me even less calm!”

“I see.” Sayama let out a breath, thought for a bit, and stated his thought from earlier. “It seems your lie and my suspicion were two different things.”

Surprise filled Shinjou’s face.

“That’s a surprisingly perceptive thing for you to say.”

"I think there has been a misunderstanding at a fundamental level."

He touched her arms again and managed to remove them.

He stood up and realized she had been hanging her head while looking at him.

When he saw her trembling shoulders and slender body, he did not hesitate to embrace her.

"Ah…"

"Sorry, but this has eliminated my misunderstanding."

"I get the feeling a second or third misunderstanding will suddenly appear later…"

"I assure you that will not happen. …So will you tell me your lie eventually?"

Shinjou shrank back a bit and finally shook her head.

"I don't want to tell you… Once you learn the truth, I think you will leave me."

"But if you do not tell me, you can never know if I will or not."

"But if I tell you, you'll definitely learn the truth. That scares me."

"I see."

"I shouldn't have said anything… The Leviathan Road has already begun and we've started to move, so I don't want to cause any discord between us."

Sayama said nothing in response because he did not know what her lie was.

But she quickly raised her head.

She removed his arms and took a step back.

"C-can we talk about something else?"

Sayama nodded and tried to come up with something enjoyable to discuss.

When he found something he thought would work, he looked in her black eyes.

"The school I attend is having a small festival called the All Holiday Festival."

"Yes… S-Setsu told me about it. Isn't it a bizarre festival where a human sacrifice is set on fire? Are you sure that's okay?"

"I am disappointed to see that Setsu-kun did not get my deadpan joke. Anyway, the festival begins the day after tomorrow. How about you come?"

"Eh? Really?"

"Really. Our academy city allows outsiders inside. As Setsu-kun's sister, it is your right to visit."

Shinjou's face brightened. But then…

"How about you, Setsu-kun, and I enjoy the festival together? I can show the two of you around."

Her expression suddenly grew troubled.

"U-um. If possible, I would prefer if it was just the two of-…" She trailed off, shook her head, and lowered her shoulders. "Sorry. I was about to lie again."

"Lie? Are you saying you do not want to see the festival with me?"

"No, that I want to do. But I was going to lie in order to accomplish that." The ends of her eyebrows lowered and she smiled. "Thanks, but give me some time to think about it. And…let me promise you one thing."

"What do you wish to promise?"

"As much as possible, I will avoid telling any unnecessary lies."

Lies, thought Sayama. *Will she ever tell me what she means by that?*

Immediately afterwards, the side door suddenly opened.

"I was sent to check on you because you've been taking an awfully long time to change a shirt," said Diana as she entered the locker room.

She saw Sayama standing in front of Shinjou who was half-naked.

Diana's smiling cheeks quickly grew tinged with red.

"O-oh, my, my, my!"

She brought her right hand to her cheek.

And with her left hand, she swiftly pressed the external intercom button on the wall.

The button activated an emergency building-wide broadcast.

"Oh, my! Would you look what this young boy and young girl are doing!"

An instant of silence followed.

Sayama and Shinjou exchanged a glance and Sayama nodded. He was smiling.

"This makes it official, Shin-…gwoh!"

"I don't want anything made official like this!"

Shinjou's knee sent Sayama collapsing to the floor.

Meanwhile, a message played over the intercom.

"Um, we just received the signal to shut down the training room. According to the emergency broadcast, our guests have stepped out of line. Um, an official is on the way to check on the situation now. Um, everyone stay as you are and please wait a moment."

Shinjou began frantically dressing herself.

On the west side of Akigawa, the lights of a certain residence filled the night.

It was the Tamiya residence. The sliding doors on the outside shined white with the light inside.

The large yard contained a few slender black dogs but no people.

The dogs protected the house along with the surveillance cameras and sensors set up in the yard.

The dogs guarding the front of the house were currently approaching a single target.

The wooden gate was being fiercely pounded on and a woman's voice shouted out.

"Hey! Kouji! How can you lock your sister out!?"

The voice coming from the other side of the gate belonged to Tamiya Ryouko, the current master of the residence. Unsure what to do, the dogs wandered around for a bit while looking toward the gate.

The dogs then heard a quiet repeating noise from beyond the gate.

A moment later, a quick electronic melody played in the house.

After a burst of static beyond the gate, Kouji's voice came over the intercom.

"Stop ringing the doorbell so much. Old man Nguyen recalled his trauma from Vietnam and has started convulsing. He doesn't have an insurance card, so he's in trouble if this keeps up."

"Sorry, Kouji. I got too focused on myself."

A sigh came over the intercom.

"But, Kouji," replied Ryouko. "You don't get to shut me out just because mom and dad took a swimming float and went to stay at a random hot spring."

"I will do this no matter what mom and dad say. Someone who spills their cup of water three times during a meal needs to be disciplined."

"Th-that wasn't my fault. It was my elbow's fault."

"You need to think about three things right now. First, do not make excuses. Second, think about what you did. Third, become a decent human being. That last one may be a lost cause, but how about you at least try?"

"Eh? What? I lost track with all those numbers. Can you explain it so I can understand?"

The intercom remained silent for a while.

"Um… Would the young master be able to explain it?" asked Ryouko after some thought.

"He would just laugh it off. He's always been overly kind to you."

"That's the normal reaction. You're supposed to treat girls with care."

"Girls? Sorry, but how old are you?"

"Why are you playing dumb? I'm 18. Try remembering that next time."

"I guess that means I'm 14. Ha ha ha. I have to go to middle school tomorrow."

"K-Kouji just went crazy."

"Sorry, but I just felt an urge to physically disconnect this intercom. May I?"

"Sure. But why?"

"May I shout 'because of the kind of person my sister is'?"

"C'mon, that doesn't sound like something you would say. …Ah, he really disconnected it. Kouji!!"

The dogs exchanged a glance as the knocking on the gate began again.

"Pes!"

The leader of the pack of dogs raised his ears.

"Pes! Come here a second!"

Wondering what was going on, Pes walked forward. The surrounding dogs nervously opened a path. Pes gave a quiet bark and wagged his tail when he arrived at the gate.

"Open the gate," whispered Ryouko.

Pes stopped moving.

"You can do it, right? Right?"

Pes shook his head back and forth. When Pes looked back, the group of black dogs scattered. For some reason, their tails and ears could be seen poking out from behind nearby bushes and stones.

"C'mon, hurry."

Ryouko let out a few odd dog-like whines and scratched her fingernails against the bottom of the gate.

Pes held his tail between his legs and began to quietly back away.

At the same time, two sounds came from the distance.

The first was the high-pitched noise of a motorcycle. The second was a man singing along with the acceleration of the engine. The out-of-tune song carried into the distance.

“A burrrrning kiiiiiick into a maaaaan’s crotch!!”

Ryouko stopped knocking on the gate and spoke a question.

“Huh? Yukihito-kun?”

Ryouko turned toward the modified motorcycle that stopped in front of the gate.

The light in front of the gate illuminated a motorcycle with three headlights attached to chopper handlebars.

Leaning against the back of the seat was Atsuta Yukihito.

"Oh, Ryouko. I thought you were a drunk."

"Long time no see, Yukihito-kun."

Atsuta wore a white summer coat and he approached by rolling the idling motorcycle forward with his feet.

He wore only sunglasses on his head as he turned toward Ryouko.

"It has been a while. How are you doing?"

"So-so. Did you just happen by?"

"That's right. What are you doing?"

"I was locked out."

As if she had just remembered, Ryouko began knocking on the door behind her. Atsuta kept his motorcycle idling.

"I can't say your brother was right for kicking out a woman who's almost thirty, but what are you doing? Why not kick the gate down?"

"I can't. This is a game to see who folds first and the rules forbid destroying anything. But if I cause a commotion out here, Kouji always folds and opens the gate. I've never lost." Ryouko looked over her shoulder at Atsuta. "Why were you passing by tonight?"

"Just getting my mind off something unpleasant."

"Did you lose at pachinko? You would always skip class and play in your uniform. But if you won any food, give some to me. Those cookies you always won were good."

"I don't have anything like that. I grew out of pachinko."

"Th-that isn't the Yukihito-kun I know!! What good are you if you won't give me any cookies!?"

"Don't base people's value on whether they give you food!"

"Nnn," groaned Ryouko. "Well, bring some next time. So what was the unpleasant thing?"

"Something at work. I might have to go a bit nuts."

"You have a job?"

"What kind of person am I in that brain of yours?"

"Hm? Exactly the kind of person you look like. You still have a lot to learn about yourself. I'm living the life that perfectly matches what I look like." She then tilted her head. "So what's your job?"

Atsuta gave a bitter smile.

"You could say I handle dangerous things. It's a truly worthless job."

"Are you doing bad things?"

Atsuta looked straight at Ryouko.

Her eyebrows were slightly lowered and her head was tilted.

"What a pain," he sighed. "Rest easy, you idiot. I'm not like I was back in school. I'm on the side of justice now."

"Eh? You're on the side of justice? …Did some organization brainwash you?"

"At least say I awoke to it, idiot. Anyway, I'm just a bit stressed because a coworker couldn't stop talking about nonsense."

"Hm. Sounds tough. …But if you're on the side of justice, the world must be coming to an end."

"That's for sure. Some of it isn't too bad, but I'm enjoying myself on the borderline between life and death ."

"Sounds like our young master."

"Your young master?"

"Yes," said Ryouko. "Have I never mentioned him? He 's the boy of the Sayama family that helped us out."

"I don't think you mentioned it."

"It would have been a long time ago, so maybe you just don't remember. He's the son of Sayama Asagi-san, the only man I've ever fallen for. He was just a child not long ago, but lately he's suddenly grown up a lot. …And it seems he has a part-time job handling dangerous things."

She took a breath.

"His name is Sayama Mikoto. Do you know him?"

"…"

Atsuta's expression changed for an instant when he heard that name. Tension filled his carefree face.

But she continued speaking and he listened silently. She told him the Sayama boy was living at school now but he would still come by to play. She also said he had made a friend named Shinjou.

"He really is just like Asagi-san."

Ryouko was smiling and her cheeks were tinged with red.

And then she suddenly realized something.

"Oh, sorry. I shouldn't talk so much about someone you don't know."

"Don't worry about it. …But this could be dangerous."

"What could?"

"If that Sayama Mikoto is working a job like mine, he's in danger. After all, you can die at a moment's notice. I can't recommend it."

"I see. But if you're working the same kind of job, you might meet him somewhere. And if he's trying to do something dangerous, stop him, okay?"

"Sure," said Atsuta. He looked away from her as if trying to put up with something. "Anyway, I've gotta go. I'm glad we could have a nice talk."

"Every talk with me is nice."

"That's for sure." He smiled bitterly. "It's going to rain soon, so make sure you get inside. You don't want to catch a cold."

Ryouko held her hand into the air and a small drop fell on the palm.

"And there it is. Well… See you later, Ryouko."

"Bye," she said with a nod.

He twisted the accelerator and the motorcycle moved forward.

The four tail lights blinked and the sound of the exhaust and of his singing disappeared into the night.

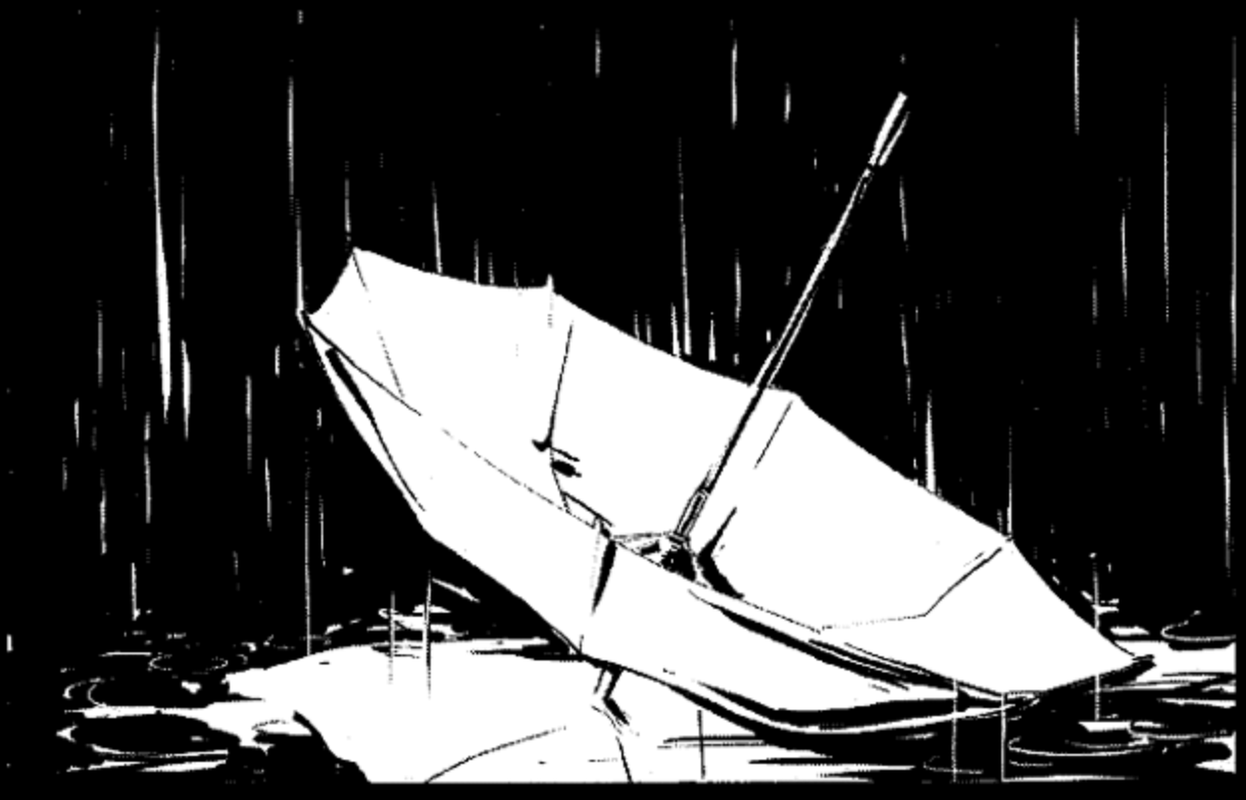
Left all alone, Ryouko looked up into the sky and then began knocking on the gate again.

“Pes? Pes! Did you run away!? I’ll neuter you!!”

Chapter 11: Falling Sounds of Rain

Chapter 11

“Falling Sounds of Rain”



In the rain
In a cage
In a lie

In the rain

In a cage

In a lie

Kashima returned home through the rainy night.

However, he was not on the path back from his workplace and he was not alone.

He was returning from the supermarket where Natsu worked part time.

Natsu stood to this right with an umbrella and he held Harumi in his arm.

Harumi was held within a bucket bag meant to hold babies. The child was contained within the cylindrical cloth bag and a vertical strap wrapped around his back to hold her in front of his body.

It was meant for Natsu who had poor grip with her left hand, but Kashima currently had the strap around

his neck. Harumi was asleep while wrapped in a towel inside the bucket bag.

Kashima held her and hummed as he walked, but Natsu's head was lowered and she seemed unenergetic.

When she opened her mouth while looking down, she spoke the same words in the same tone she had several times already.

"I'm… I'm really sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. Someone mistakenly took your umbrella is all."

"It still isn't acceptable. Not only did I not make it home in time for the head of the household, I had him come get me," she said decisively with her head lowered a bit.

Even in the dark, he could tell the movements of her white denim shirt lacked energy.

Kashima watched Natsu as she kept to the center of the umbrella and stared at the ground.

She looks like a scolded puppy, he thought.

A small smile appeared on his face just as Natsu turned toward him with a troubled look.

"That isn't acceptable, right?"

"Right, right. Now, which umbrella was taken?"

"I brought the cheap plastic one because I didn't want it to get stolen. …But I think someone thought it had been left behind."

"Maybe we should get one with a nametag."

"Oh, I know a store in Asakusa that makes excellent umbrellas. We could-…" She trailed off and shook her head. "We need to stick to our budget."

"Don't say that with such disappointment. You can spend a bit of money."

"I shouldn't. Also, my parents always go to that store."

"I see," said Kashima with a nod.

He thought about pulling her toward him by the shoulders, but unfortunately, his hands were full.

As he lamented that fact, Natsu spoke up again.

“But how did you know I was still at the supermarket, Akio-san?”

“Well, to be honest, I was looking around everywhere.”

“Hee hee. Were you worried?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Natsu looked a bit surprised and Kashima was not entirely sure what to say.

“I was pretty worried. It’s been a while since the front door didn’t open when I got home.”

“That hasn’t happened since I was rushed to the hospital to give birth, has it? Sorry.”

“Maybe we should carry cell phones.”

“It might be useful for you, but I’m fine. And I have a bad habit of spending too much time on the phone. I think the charges would be ridiculous if I had a cell phone.” Natsu smiled and looked toward their daughter.

"She really is sleeping well. She never cries when you're around. Did you know that? It's like our family's great god Kashima gives us peace."

"You're part of the Kashima family now, too. I think it's when the two of us are together that Harumi doesn't cry."

"Thank you very much."

Is that really something you respond to with a smile and your thanks? thought Kashima as he looked at her.

Something glittered at her neck. It was a ring hanging from a short silver chain.

He suddenly felt a tug on his right sleeve, the same arm holding the umbrella.

Natsu's left hand had grabbed the sleeve of his lab coat. The three fingers of that hand held on weakly.

She remained facing forward and her eyebrows were a bit relaxed, but she spoke.

"I really was happy when you came for me even when I didn't call for you." The ends of her eyebrows lowered. "You always come to save me."

"I…" began Kashima, but he could think of nothing to say.

Should he agree or disagree with her use of the word " save"?

He did not know which was the correct answer for her and which was the incorrect answer for himself.

…I just don't know.

His uncertain thoughts naturally produced silence. Natsu smiled a bit with the ends of her eyebrows still lowered.

And then Harumi's small body began to tremble in Kashima's arms.

The instant he stopped, they happened to be approaching an intersection.

And he saw a light to the right. It was a car's headlights.

It was turning their way as if scraping the inner corner.

"_____"

Natsu dropped her umbrella in the rain.

Rain fell on UCAT headquarters which was disguised as a transportation administration building.

The spray striking the ground was visible from the first floor lobby.

Shinjou sat in the sofa by the window which was the optimal spot to view the rainy night.

Ooshiro sat on the other side of the sofa in a lab coat and they both watched the white rainy road jump up into the darkness.

"Amazing…"

"Spring is coming to an end. This is the rain of the changing season. Not long after the rain ends, it will be time for the farmers to plant rice."

Shinjou heard Ooshiro sigh.

The sigh sounded meaningful, so she turned from the window and looked at him.

"Why are you giving me a thumbs up, Ooshiro-san?"

"Well, Shinjou-kun. I hear you were alone in the men's locker room with Mikoto-kun."

"We didn't do anything inappropriate," she said almost too quickly. "There is a rumor spreading because of Diana-san, though."

"Oh, my." Ooshiro exaggeratedly covered his face with his hands. "When did you learn to snap back at me like that?"

"You don't have to wiggle around like that."

"You're no fun. You need to play along, Shinjou-kun."

"How about you go back to your room and play more of that game with girls in it? Was it called Osaka Nanba Street? You said you quit early from the shock of falling for a transvestite, right?"

"Wow, and now it's a cement-like opinion that exposes a secret!?"

Shinjou ignored him and looked out the window while resting her head on her hands. The window reflected the painting of the Virgin Mary on the opposite wall. She had thought seeing herself reflected below it while looking at the rain would make her look like a heroine from a novel or something. However…

"I just look sleepy…"

Shinjou heard Ooshiro sigh again.

Not again, she thought as she turned toward him.

"…"

He was sitting on the sofa and staring at her.

"Did you tell Mikoto-kun your lie?" he asked.

Shinjou slowly shook he head.

"But I told him Setsu and I both have the lie."

"I see." He nodded and once more said, "I see."

He said nothing more, so Shinjou tilted her head.

"What should I do?"

"I think you shouldn't ask me."

"Why not?"

"Asking someone will give you the answer right away. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, but isn't that why you ask people?"

"If you want, you can ask me here and I will give you a hint. But isn't Mikoto-kun thinking about your lie without asking anyone else for help?"

She thought on that. She thought again. She thought a third time. But…

"Yeah… He would never ask someone else."

So…

"Are you telling me not to rush this?"

"You need to give him time to prepare. He needs to prepare to accept you."

She trembled a bit as she recalled what Sayama had said in the locker room.

…*He wants to face me properly.*

She placed the meaning of those words deep in her heart.

"Shinjou-kun, you can think alongside him. Even if your physical location and coordinates are different, you can think alongside him in time. You can decide what to do after that."

Shinjou nodded and Ooshiro sat shallowly in the sofa and spread his legs a bit.

"Sadame is the sister and Setsu is the brother… That idiot Itaru comes up with the most unnecessary things."

"But that name has always protected me."

"And it is why you are troubled now, isn't it? It sounds like more trouble than it's worth to me."

"D-don't act like you're not involved in this."

"But I'm not, not, not!"

"Ah, that really ticks me off!"

"Wa ha ha," laughed Ooshiro as he raised his right thumb and looked out the window.

The rain had grown more intense than before.

Shinjou saw his expression change for just an instant.

She tilted her head at that hint of harshness.

"Does the rain bring back some bad memory? Do you melt when it hits you?"

"What am I, a Youkai? …Anyway, do you remember the night eight years ago when there was a collapse three mountains over?"

"I…think I do. Wasn't that when everyone went out to help because it was an emergency, but you slept through it all and Itaru-san beat you up afterwards?"

"Y-you don't have to remember that second half."

"I don't remember much about the accident, but I do remember Itaru-san grabbing you by the collar and delivering a barrage of body blows while Sf-san made tea to the side. The cookies were good. As a child, I think the fun part left more of an impact than the disaster."

"You think it's fun that I had my ribs broken? My left side always starts to ache on rainy days like this."

Ooshiro's shoulders drooped and Shinjou apologized twice.

"It was a horrible collapse, wasn't it?" she continued. " Wasn't a bus heading into the mountains caught in the collapse?"

"Yes. The only passenger was badly injured. She was a college student on her way to view some relics from the Jomon period that were being excavated in the mountains. At least I think that's what Itaru said."

"What happened to her?"

"Broken glass injured her left hand pretty badly. But the worst part was that the mud trapped her in the bus. She couldn't move at all and was stuck with the rain hitting her for about two hours. I heard she couldn't go out on rainy days anymore and that she dropped out of college."

Shinjou realized her expression changed as she listened. The ends of her eyebrows lowered and she tried to say something, but Ooshiro spoke before she could.

"What would you think if I told you UCAT was actually responsible for that collapse?"

"…Eh?"

"At the time, UCAT was being reorganized. The development department was almost completely switched out, so they had to get the hang of things. As that department is primarily made up of 2nd-Gear people, they were investigating Susaou which had sealed Yamata, 2nd-Gear's Concept Core. But when they saw the damage to Susaou's bridge, they realized there was nothing to gain."

"A-and what happened then?"

"2nd-Gear is full of engineers, so they began researching powerful concept weapons. …At the time, we were already assuming we would be fighting concept weapons powered by Concept Cores. They wanted to create a weapon as powerful as Izumo-kun's and Kazami-kun's." He took a breath. "And their testing ground was…"

"Y-you don't mean…"

"Yes, the site of that accident. 2nd-Gear had created a prototype Cowling Sword made up of only the necessary parts, but the tester couldn't control the power and sliced the mountain. It had probably already been softened a bit by the rain, but that would still require as much power as the second form Izumo-kun's V-Sw."

Shinjou gulped.

That man named Atsuta had not seemed afraid of Izumo and Kazami at all.

…They're aiming to make weapons like the ones those two have.

"B-but UCAT wasn't blamed for it, were they?"

"No. It was an accident and we're an organization the public can't know about. All we can do is provide indirect financial support."

"Th-that isn't what I meant." Shinjou stood up without thinking. "Did you ever make up for what you did?"

"That's a good question." Ooshiro tilted his head. "But after that, 2nd-Gear's concept weapon research focused on usability rather than power. V-Sw, G-Sp2, and your Ex-St are exceptions. Also, the engineer who caused the accident stopped developing weapons and instead researched output control. And…"

"And?"

"The woman injured in the accident was apparently an acquaintance of his from college and they married after the accident. According to Director Tsukuyomi, he hasn't told her about UCAT, but they had their first child this year."

"So he took responsibility for the accident?"

"Responsibility? What responsibility?" asked Ooshiro. "He can't tell her about UCAT, so she still doesn't know the truth about the accident. Do you see any responsibility there?"

"Well…"

Shinjou started to say something, but Ooshiro raised his hands and said "calm down".

She then realized she was oddly stuck on this topic.

…It's because we're similar.

She was lying and revealing the truth could hurt Sayama.

That engineer was lying and he continued to live with the victim without revealing the truth.

"…"

She remained silent with a hand on her mouth and Ooshiro sighed.

"I think Mikoto-kun would have this to say: he is trying to make up for his crime, but isn't he simply prolonging it?"

Shinjou was not so sure. She wondered what she would do in his place.

…Wait. Is that engineer…?

"Who is this engineer?"

"Kashima Akio."

"…!"

She knew him and Ooshiro nodded to affirm it.

"You met him in the cafeteria, didn't you? He is 2nd-Gear's negotiator."

Shinjou suddenly felt strength leave her legs and she sat limply on the sofa.

In the cafeteria, she had asked him if he was lying about something.

…He is continuing to lie for the sake of someone he cares about.

He had remained by her side for so long while hiding the fact that he hurt her.

That was his decision. And…

"I…"

She could tell her face had grown pale.

She saw Ooshiro nod.

"Duty and humanity. It is very like 2nd-Gear and very like Japan. It's a tricky thing, Shinjou-kun. 2nd-Gear is the world of Japanese mythology, but did you know there are two contrasting heroes in that mythology?"

"Susanoo and Yamato Takeru, right?"

"Yes." Ooshiro smiled and nodded. "Japanese mythology can be very deep. One hero was hated for being violent, but he lived an honest life. Another hero was praised for being beautiful, but he lived a life of lies. However…"

"However?"

"After Susanoo became a hero, he continued his life as Storm God Susanoo. Yamato Takeru on the other hand was originally named Ousu, but when he destroyed Kumaso, he was given the name Takeru by Kumaso Takeru. …You can think of that as the distinction between them."

Those words surprised Shinjou.

But after she thought for a moment, she nodded.

Thoughts of those two heroes of the past raced through her mind.

One hero stuck with his own methods and lived without changing his name while the other hero changed .

…What if…?

What if the two of them met?

As that idea entered her head, she felt as if she could not see. She could hear the rain as white noise, but Ooshiro's voice suddenly cut in.

"Anyway, it is time to go home for today. You can have Sf-kun bring out the car to take you where you belong."

Kashima listened to the rain in the darkness of the night.

He could feel the breathing of his young daughter in his left arm and he could feel the rain striking the umbrella in his right hand.

And he could feel the pulse and trembling of a woman in his right arm.

It was Natsu.

When the headlights had approached, he had pulled her close with the arm holding the umbrella.

She was now clinging to him from within his arm.

The car had passed with no sign of noticing them and he could not even hear it any longer.

But Natsu was still clinging to him so close he could feel her pulse.

“It’s okay.”

Kashima squeezed with his right arm to put her at ease .

But she did not calm down even in his embrace.

“Nn…” she groaned and clung to him even tighter.

It was as if his embrace had given her permission to approach him further.

Her right hand wrapped around his left arm which held their child.

"…"

Her left hand grabbed at the back of his lab coat as if scratching at it, let go, and then grabbed a different spot.

She repeated the clumsy action again and again, but she did not stop.

With the weak grip of that hand, she must not have felt she was gripping tight enough.

Kashima was holding both the umbrella and their child, so he could not hold her hand.

"I hate the rain…" said Natsu suddenly.

Kashima was a bit surprised to hear her trembling voice spoken into his chest.

"Natsu-san."

"I hate it…"

She began to cry.

"I hate it…"

The way she trembled, clung to him, and looked down toward the ground looked just like a child. He bent down to bring his head closer to hers.

"You don't like it, do you?"

Natsu shook her head, breathe in, and scratched harder with her left hand on his back.

"Akio-san…"

"I'm here. So is Harumi."

Kashima looked around for Natsu's umbrella.

…*There it is.*

The red umbrella had been blown away by the car, so it had rolled into the middle of the road.

The streetlights illuminated its silhouette. It was lying upside down and its round form had collapsed. Two or three rods of the frame had broken, so it was useless.

This isn't good, he thought.

They had only one umbrella and he could not let the rain hit Natsu or Harumi.

Natsu's shoulders trembled and they rose and fell with her breathing.

Had she calmed down a bit?

As he leaned over, the cold rain soaked his back. That chill was the complete opposite of the warmth coming from the two lives in his arms.

But…

…This is my responsibility.

He would give them what they wanted.

If they were at peace, he would leave them be. If they were trembling, he would stop it.

He recalled that rainy day eight years before.

…I underestimated my own power.

That had led to a certain instant back then and what lay before his eyes now.

For an instant, he had been drunk on his own destructive power, but that had quickly changed to panic when he realized what he had done.

It had taken hours for help to arrive through the rain.

When he had dug through the mud, he had found the incomplete hand of his old classmate.

He could not hold that hand now, so he called out to her.

“Natsu-san.”

Back then, he had called her family name from their time in college.

He had used the name “Takagi” which was a common surname in Tokyo.

But now that they had the same surname, he used her given name.

"Natsu-san."

…She does not know the truth.

"Natsu-san."

…She does not know about UCAT.

She slowly raised her head.

…She does not know about 2nd-Gear.

She was still crying.

…She does not know about me.

He nodded and loosened his embrace around her.

…But…

She trembled and he held Harumi out toward her.

…I will do anything for her.

She looked back and forth between him and Harumi, nodded, and chose Harumi.

She supported the bucket bag with her right hand and he removed the strap from around his neck.

She attached the strap around her own neck and wrapped her arm around Harumi and the bag.

Harumi opened her eyes and looked up at Natsu's teary eyes.

"Ah," said Harumi with a smile.

Natsu finally smiled within Kashima's arm.

She gently moved Harumi up and down to settle the baby's breathing.

"Ah," said Harumi again.

She went on to make several light laughs that sounded similar to "ah" or "hyah".

Natsu looked down at Harumi and nodded.

"What a good girl," she said with a sigh.

She was back to normal.

…Except for the flush in her cheeks and the dampness in the corners of her eyes.

With that thought, Kashima took a mental sigh of relief.

…Thank goodness.

"I'm going to grab the other umbrella and head home. Can you continue on ahead?" he asked.

Natsu looked up at his face and the umbrella held above their heads.

"When you lean over to match my height, your back sticks out." She suddenly realized something. "Y-your back is already wet."

"But I can't have the rain hitting you or Harumi."

"Thank you. B-but I can't have the rain hitting the head of the household."

Natsu looked troubled, but she soon crouched down while holding Harumi and looked up at him.

"Um…"

"Do you want me to carry you?"

She blushed but did not deny it.

She was quite a troublesome wife, but Kashima did as she wished.

He blushed too, but he had enough of an excuse to do this.

He had decided he would do anything for those two.

Kashima crouched down with the umbrella in his right hand and wrapped both arms under Natsu's back and butt while she held Harumi.

And he picked her up.

"Kyah."

She was light. He had thought that before. He had happily done this during their wedding and when she was pregnant with Harumi.

Back then, he had held her in his arms and realized how light she was and how important she was to him.

She was like a bouquet of flowers.

The umbrella in his right hand covered the sky above their heads and protected all three of them from the rain.

The bigger of the two held against his chest smiled and spoke.

“We should have brought the video camera. We won’t be able to do this once Haru-chan grows up.”

“I’d be too embarrassed.”

“Don’t worry. No one but us would watch it.”

“I suppose so,” he said with a nod.

Now they only had to hurry. Once he had Natsu reach out and pick up the other umbrella, it was only about three hundred meters to their home. His arms would last that long.

He began to walk with two smiles in his arms.

He looked back at them with a smile of his own and he thought to himself.

He thought about the Leviathan Road.

…Should I be involved in it?

In the cafeteria, Atsuta had said it looked like he had already made up his mind.

Atsuta may have been right.

While listening to the rain, he thought back to that accident and to his own power which had created the sword that caused it.

That was his true power.

…That is the power I need to deny.

But Kashima had another thought as he gave an inward sigh.

…Why can't I forget about that power?

Chapter 12: Morning Plan

Chapter 12

“Morning Plan”

Welcome to a place of comfort
The wind blows along the heavenly path
And the people return to the grass of the land

Welcome to a place of comfort

The wind blows along the heavenly path

And the people return to the grass of the land

Even on Saturday, the Kazami household got an early start.

The father was a project planner, so he could choose to take days off but had no set days off.

He usually took off when Kazami announced she would be returning home, but her decision had been sudden this time. As such, the father had to begin eating breakfast at seven in the morning.

Her familial duty outweighed her sleepiness, so Kazami joined them for breakfast.

The small built-in kitchen was as pristine as ever.

The table contained cups of soup and ingredients to make breakfast sandwiches.

Kazami's parents looked toward her from the table.

"Oh." Her mother's long hair swayed as she stood up. "What do you want to drink?"

"Coffee. Chisato, you want coffee, right?" Her father stopped putting together a sandwich on his plate and looked at her through his glasses. "I know you're tired, but I would love it if you could fully wake up for breakfast."

"Oh, sure. I'll have tea."

Not even Kazami was sure who she had been responding to as she sat in her chair.

Her father looked a bit disappointed as he reached over the table.

A few plates were lined up on the table which contained lettuce, lightly fried eggs, ham, onion, tomatoes, and other ingredients.

The Kazami family's style was to make a sandwich by taking what you wanted and piling it up on bread.

"You're taking too much, dad."

"A-am I? Maybe I am. It's just so fun."

"Are you ever going to grow up?"

Her mother gave a troubled sigh when she saw the ingredients piled ten centimeters thick.

Seeing her mother in a blue shirt preparing a teapot and her father folding his arms in a gray hooded sweatshirt, Kazami finally felt she was truly home.

"You're dressed too, mom? Are both of you going somewhere?"

"Yes. I'm going to the site with him."

That comment cleared away Kazami's sleepiness.

She could tell her shoulders had jumped. She belatedly noticed the chill of the morning air.

"Are you singing again?"

"I'm just going with him."

Her mother had a hint of warning in her voice, but her father spoke up.

"But there is a plan for a combined Christmas concert toward the end of the year. The main performers will of course be whoever the sponsors choose, but there's still room for a guest performer. What should I do?"

"I see."

Kazami nodded and turned toward her mother who was preparing tea.

Her actions were no different from normal, so Kazami had no idea what she was thinking.

…Does she think it's just his usual nonsense?

However, the delighted look on her father's face left Kazami almost certain he was serious. The way he meaninglessly began eating his sandwich starting with the top of the pile was the same as always, so her certainty only grew.

Then her cup of tea arrived along with two slices of bread on a plate.

"I see both my parents are working hard," commented Kazami as she spread margarine on the bread.

"What about you, Chisato? Are things going well with Izumo-kun?"

She wished he had not brought that up.

"Well…" she said as she thought.

"Make sure to bring him by sometime. Don't drive him away on the doorstep."

"I'm not driving him away…"

"But you are kicking him away so he leaves, aren't you ? I saw you," said her mother as she sat down.

Her lips were smiling, but her eyes were not.

"I'll invite him in next week," obediently promised Kazami.

"All right!"

Her parents smiled and high-fived.

…Why is that idiot so popular?

Kazami sighed inwardly, but her mother was already humming.

"I'll make korokke next week. I'm sure your papa and Izumo-kun will eat and drink like crazy in another competition, so I can make a whole lot. I'll make white ones, curry ones, cream ones, and rare super-spicy wasabi ones for a surprise."

"Sounds great. Make sure to put in plenty of chopped cabbage. We need to show who the better man is once and for all. I'll do my best! Even if it's meaningless!"

"Kyah! You're so cool! Even if it's pointless."

"U-um, mom, dad? Why are you discussing next week before this week is over?"

"Hm? Did you say something, Chisato? Could you say it again?"

"No, never mind. …And mom, why have you had such a scary look in your eyes lately?"

"Don't worry about it. You need to root for Izumo-kun next week. We're pointlessly splitting into a parents team and a daughter/son-in-law team, so…"

"Sorry, but what kind of project are you working on now, dad?"

He looked up at the ceiling for a moment.

"It might be due to the material I came up with that was used on that suspicious educational program 'Can You Do This?' last week. At any rate, I'm working on a replacement project for the anime 'Mr. Guevara' that's ending due to censorship."

"I'm going to ignore half of that, but what is the replacement project?"

"It's a sequel to the Aretorman series. Y'know, that cult classic from the Showa era. We're making Aretorman Shoot which follows the story after Aretorman Cement. In the first episode, Shoot refuses to shake the monster's hand, climbs on top of him, and punches him for three minutes straight. He doesn't stop even as the monster tries to tap out. It's really exciting."

"Let me guess. In the second episode, does the monster get behind him, pin his arms, and make him put up with it for three minutes?"

"How did you know? That's my daughter for you. Once Shoot realizes how to reverse the situation, he gradually begins to learn how to wrestle properly. He learns at the Aretor Training Base known as the Man Hole."

"I have a feeling this is going to be taken off the air for a different reason."

"Hmm."

Her father folded his arms and thought.

Kazami saw her mother pour him some tea, but she was fairly certain his cup had originally held coffee. She began to sweat, but then he took a sip.

"Delicious. Your tea is always great."

She knew she would never be any match for those parents. She also began to wonder if she would end up like them in the future.

But she ignored that thought and her father asked her a question.

"What has you lost in thought? If you have any trouble or problems at school, just tell me. What does it matter that I won't be any help whatsoever?"

Unsure what to say to that, she changed the subject.

"How about you two calm down for now? It's breakfast time."

She sighed and began to make a sandwich of her own. She started with a lightly fried egg, lettuce, and mayonnaise. Then…

"Let's add some jam, salted kombu, yam, and-… gah! Ch-Chisato! Domestic violence is wrong!"

"Mom, do something about him."

"Bad papa."

Is that all? she thought, but her father really did hold his head and tremble.

She realized this was another method of scolding someone.

"Chisato, just put up with it. Having you back has left your papa a bit wrong in the head."

"I'll agree with that last part."

Suddenly, Kazami realized how she could make use of her father.

"Hey, dad. Have any of your past projects dealt with Japanese mythology?"

Her father raised his head.

"Hm? Oh. Yes, they have."

"I was investigating some stuff with Kaku and a few underclassmen, so do you know anything interesting related to Yamata no Orochi?"

"Hmm. Yamata no Orochi, you say? …There's a lot there. Do have any keyword to focus on?"

"Well…"

When she brought a hand to her chin and tilted her head, she realized her mother was making the exact same pose as she thought. She had not noticed Kazami though, so Kazami merely smiled bitterly.

…What would be a good keyword? 2nd-Gear is only known by UCAT, so they wouldn't know that term. Then what? 2nd-Gear's concepts deal with…

"Names. Do you have anything interesting related to the keyword of names?"

"Names?" asked her father as he looked up again.

The smile on his face told her she had chosen right.

"Chisato. Tell me the story of Yamata no Orochi's slaying."

"Well," began Kazami. "After being banished to the surface, Susanoo fell in love with Kushinada-hime who was to be sacrificed to Yamata no Orochi. She promised to marry him and he got Orochi drunk and cut off the serpent's heads. Is that good enough?"

"You shortened it like crazy, but that's more or less it."

"I've been studying it lately. Oh, and the sword that cut off Orochi's heads was called Totsuka. The sword chipped in the process and, when Susanoo checked to see what had happened, he found another sword within Orochi. It was a nice sword, so he gave it a test swing and it easily cut through the surrounding grass. That was Kusanagi, aka the Grass Cutting Sword."

And…

"Susanoo married Kushinada and settled in the Izumo province. When his descendant presented Kusanagi to Amaterasu, he regained his position as god. That's the story, right?"

Her father nodded and muttered the word "names".

"I am going to explain this in an indirect way, Chisato. In ancient Japan, people changed their name upon coming of age. You learned that in ancient literature class , right?"

Kazami nodded, but she did not actually remember that.

"Good, good," said her father without realizing the truth.

The bitter smile on her mother's face made it clear she had caught on.

Kazami once more realized she would never be a match for them.

"Okay, Chisato. Why do you think people would change their name?" asked her father.

"Eh?"

She did not know, but she gave it serious thought.

"Because they were adults?"

"Sorry, but no. Think about it. In Japanese mythology, Yamato Takeru gained that name upon killing his enemy , Kumaso Takeru. Changing one's name does not mean becoming an adult."

Then what was it?

As she thought, she saw her mother shaking back and forth a bit. For some reason, her right hand would rise some and fall some, but Kazami ignored her.

Kazami continued to think and realized the answer was surprisingly close by.

When she had first met Izumo Kaku, he had used the language of 10th-Gear. His language and his name had been different. And now he used Japanese.

"Because their position changed?"

"Correct. In ancient times, one's name indicated their job or position in society. When that changed, their name changed. Returning to Yamato Takeru, the name Takeru means hero. The hero of Kumaso was Kumaso Takeru and the boy who killed him was given the position of the hero of Yamato."

Kazami's mother secretly snapped her fingers and struck a pose.

Her father did not notice his wife's action and raised three fingers on his right hand.

"Now, with that in mind, let's get down to the real issue. There are three mysteries surrounding the story of Susanoo and Yamata."

He lowered his ring finger.

"The first mystery is why the name Yamata no Orochi does not refer to a job or position."

"…Eh?"

"Think about it. What does Yamata no Orochi refer to?"

It meant Eight-Forked Great Serpent, so it referred to his form.

"Ah," said Kazami when she realized that. "Are you asking why Yamata didn't have a name?"

"Yes. Yamata no Orochi had the important role of producing the sword Kusanagi, but he was not given a job or position. This goes against the established rules. So why was this giant, eight-headed dragon of Japanese mythology not given a name?"

He then lowered his middle finger.

"The next mystery is about Susanoo."

Kazami knew this one, so she took the initiative and raised her hand.

"It's why he kept the name Susanoo after being banished from the heavens, right?"

"Yes. He descended to the human world, but he kept his name. Why is that? You have the great serpent with no name, the storm god whose name did not change, and then one other mystery."

"The last one is related to Kusanagi, right?" said her mother.

Kazami and her father turned her mother's way. She shrunk back and said "sorry" while sticking out her tongue.

But Kazami did not understand.

"What's wrong with Kusanagi?"

"Oh?" Her father turned toward her with an expression similar to a smile. "How about you discuss

that with your friends? This is a topic I tried to get put on an educational program, but no one would take it. I hope it will be some use to you, Chisato."

There was no worry of that.

…This is more than enough.

Not only did she have some hints, but she had realized some things herself too. She felt that was quite good for the athletic type. On top of that, she had some mysteries for them to solve.

"I'm glad I came home to visit," she said.

Her parents cheered and high-fived.

She would never be a match for them.

It was still morning, but Kashima was in UCAT's cafeteria.

It was only occupied by a few night shift workers, so it was nice and quiet.

"Why did you bring me here, Atsuta? I haven't even entered the design room yet."

"This is about the time you usually get some Nappa cabbage from your parents. If so, you'll be working on getting rid of your extra pickled vegetables. Hand them over."

Atsuta wore his combat uniform and held out chopsticks and a bowl piled high with white rice.

"Are you going to eat nothing but pickled vegetables and rice?"

"Don't underestimate me, military god. An old saying says to eat vegetables on your rice and a bowl of soup. This is the same."

He pulled something out of his pocket and placed it on the table.

It was a can of coffee. It was a UCAT brand named Morning Coffee Gotz. To increase its morning image, a high contrast red and white image of a healthy butler wearing nothing but an apron was printed on the can.

"Is that your 'soup'? I suppose the color does resemble miso soup, but having that, Nappa cabbage, and rice for breakfast is really mixing Japanese and western, don't you think?"

"You got a problem with this? Keh. You sure have gotten full of yourself."

"Do you even know what 'full of yourself' means? Anyway, you want me to provide the vegetables?" With an exasperated sigh, Kashima took Natsu's homemade bento from his bag. "Natsu actually predicted this. Look, she even put in some of the pickled cherry blossoms you like."

"Oh, where she pickles the flower petals? They're a bit bitter, so they go good with alcohol. …Unlike you, your wife does everything so well it almost pisses me off."

"I can't tell if you're complaining or complimenting her."

"You idiot. A guy can't compliment women that easily ."

"You mean you have to compliment them difficultly?"

"Eh? Oh, well, um…what? I guess, uh… You idiot!"

"I'm not sure how you ended up there, but that's quite the conclusion. At any rate, I'll tell Natsu-san what you said."

"Yeah, you do that. Tell her 'Please make more, dammit!' "

"I really don't understand what you're trying to say half the time," said Kashima with his usual sigh.

He suddenly realized Atsuta had opened the pack in his hand and started eating.

He did not approve of using the Art of Walking on friends, but using it may have been second nature to Sword God Atsuta.

"Is it good?"

He took the lack of a response as a yes.

The next thing he knew, Atsuta had refilled his bowl of rice and the pickled vegetables were almost gone.

Atsuta then spoke up as if carried by his momentum.

"So what're you gonna do about the Leviathan Road?"

"I'm not sure. …How about you do it?"

"C'mon." Atsuta stopped moving his chopsticks. "You really have no motivation, do you?"

"To be honest, no. The commotion here yesterday reminded me I have no reason at all to care about 2nd-Gear."

"Stop treating this all so seriously and just give yourself a reason, you idiot."

"Don't say that. I really don't have a reason. Seeing the damage to Susaou made my grandfather's dying words meaningless, and now I have a family."

He recalled Sayama's words from the day before.

…He wants to properly face 2nd-Gear.

"They're all so serious, so I think they deserve someone better than me."

"Then quit."

Atsuta took a breath and spat out more words.

"Just quit UCAT."

Kashima thought for a while about Atsuta's suggestion
.

"That might be a good idea."

"Wait."

"Don't give me that look, Atsuta. To be honest, for someone with my lack of guts, in my position, and with my thoughts, running away by dropping out might be easier."

If he quit, he would not have to worry anymore. He would have no reason to hold on to it all anymore.

He suddenly thought about how his parents lived. Rather than choosing the path of a swordsmith, they had chosen farming. The only blades they held were kitchen knives and sickles.

Natsu felt bad about receiving vegetables from them, but it delighted them.

"Some people have more than one option. That's just how it is."

"And are you one of them, Kashima?"

"I don't know, but I left the path of a swordsmith after that accident eight years ago. My hands never again held a chisel and I only provide adjustments to finished products using a keyboard." Kashima lightly tapped his fingernails on the table. "It's been eight years. I have not made a single Cowling Sword since then. If I have a chance to leave…"

"Are you saying that chance is now? Are you saying you'll run just as you've been given the important role of Leviathan Road negotiator?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying." He took a breath. "I can't reveal anything. I can't even tell my child about the weapons-making skills passed down by my ancestors. If I'm going to quit, now is the time. I can join Low-Gear and have a happy family. …I always wondered if I was a resident of Low-Gear or not, but my child won't."

"Then what are you gonna do about the truth of 2nd-Gear you mentioned before? Only your family knows about it."

"I can pass it on to Director Tsukuyomi and leave the decision with her."

He looked forward and saw Atsuta who was rising up from his chair a bit.

"Are you serious?"

"I'm not sure. I just went with the flow of the conversation. But this is tough." His shoulders drooped. "I can't seem to decide what I should do."

Atsuta clicked his tongue and lowered back into his chair.

"You don't really need a reason, y'know? I enjoy cutting people down for no reason."

"Are you hoping to find someone who agrees with how your brain works?"

Kashima gave a bitter smile and Atsuta narrowed his eyes.

"Oh? You think I don't have a reason to care about the Leviathan Road, do you?"

"I-it can't be. …Do you?"

"Don't act so surprised, you idiot. Yes, I do. It's about a girl I've fallen for."

"That classmate from your school days? That's an odd connection. Well, I won't pry, but it sounds like a personal grudge."

"How is that not prying?"

With a look of annoyance, Atsuta slid over the pack of pickled vegetables.

"What? You don't want it?"

"Idiot. I can't eat the pickled vegetables of a woman who seduced a military god."

"Ha ha ha. You're jealous that I have such a great wife."

"Do you ever listen…?" Atsuta spat out a "keh" and took a sip of coffee. "Gather your things and get lost, you loser. This is pathetic. Completely pathetic. The Kashima family of Takemikazuchi, 2nd-Gear's greatest military god and swordsmith, is dropping out to be with his wife and kid? Have fun with your home life, dammit."

"I'm amazed you can say this much about it."

Atsuta clicked his tongue, leaned back, and looked up at the ceiling.

Kashima did not resent him. He felt he was a good friend to have around.

"I haven't decided whether I will drop out or not. I just don't have the energy to face the Leviathan Road. UCAT pays well and sticking with it will allow me to pay off my mortgage. …I'm just troubled because I don't enjoy it at all."

"Fine, fine."

Atsuta straightened up and picked up his bowl. He grabbed the salt from the seasonings on the table and sprinkled some on the rice.

"Hey, Kashima."

"What is it, Atsuta? And aren't you putting too much salt on that?"

"You idiot, I need salt because I have low blood pressure. You didn't know that?"

"First I've heard of it. Relative to you, the rest of humanity must have extremely low blood pressure."

"If you're gonna say that, I have something else to say. I'll ask this in place of a parting gift: What is the truth of 2nd-Gear and Yamata's question?"

"I will tell that to Director Tsukuyomi first."

"Is it that important?"

"I don't really know." Kashima tilted his head. "My ancestors have been passing it down for generations, so

we've kind of lost sight of the importance. And that's apparently why Yamata didn't trust my ancestor's answer when 2nd-Gear was destroyed."

"Then isn't it useless now?"

"It's still useful as a negotiating tool. Low-Gear wants to know it." Kashima folded his arms and said something even he felt was unlike him. "Ooshiro Hiromasa found that word in exchange for his life. My grandfather resented him and that word made him suffer and swear complete submission to Low-Gear. …It must have value." Kashima smiled bitterly and kept the smile on his face. "But it's been 60 years. We've become too influenced by Low-Gear."

Once he finished speaking, Atsuta stopped moving his chopsticks and gave an annoyed look.

Kashima wondered why for a moment, but then realized the answer.

…Oh. I'm giving a strange smile, aren't I?

His eyebrows were bent weakly and his head was lowered, but his smile remained.

As he wondered what that kind of smile was called, Atsuta's voice prodded at his thoughts.

"Well, if the desire to quit doesn't go away, stop by the design room's third production room."

"The third-…"

Kashima suddenly frowned.

The third production room was a forbidden room in the development department.

It had remained unopened since that night eight years ago.

"That's where I sealed-…"

"You can't say it? But you haven't forgotten, have you ? There's something in there that can't just be thrown out as oversized trash. The power you sealed away is in there ."

Kashima suddenly remembered.

Eight years ago, he had saved Natsu from the mud and carried her into the rescue vehicle.

Afterwards, while he was soaking wet from the rain, he had lifted something up from the mud without even wiping the blood from his fingers.

It was a sword frame that had broken in two.

…I sealed it deep in the corporation bearing the name Izumo .

"Do you get it, Kashima? You sealed away what should've been given to me: the Cowling Sword Futsuno. Even while sealed, the residual fear it emits is enough to keep the newbies away." He took a breath. "If you quit, get rid of it. It's only polite."

As the morning came to an end, Sayama and the others wore their school uniforms as they walked through the city.

They were on their way to the Tamiya household where Sayama had grown up.

Sayama, Ooki, and Shinjou Setsu led the way and other volunteers from their class followed.

They all held wooden panels, paint, metal pipes, or other materials.

Shinjou turned back toward line following them and spoke to Sayama.

"We're skipping fourth period to build a festival stand at your mansion. This is kind of amazing."

"Ooki-sensei did a splendid job of forgetting to order the materials. I have business in Tachikawa later, but I can help out until then. We have to get this stand built fast."

That afternoon, he had the preliminary negotiations with 2nd-Gear in the concept space within Showa Memorial Park.

…I wonder if that Kashima will show up.

As Sayama thought, he saw Ooki walking ahead of him.

She wore a blouse and was swinging her arms while humming a cheerful tune.

"Lunch at Sayama-kun's place is sure to be magnificent!"

Shinjou poked at Sayama's arm.

"Sayama-kun, can't you stop her from speaking her mind so honestly?"

"No. If it was possible, I would have done so last year. The results were less than satisfactory."

"That must have been tough."

Ooki suddenly turned around with a smile on her face.

"I wanted to go with the entire class, but I guess that isn't going to happen. A lot of people are busy preparing the stands for their clubs or have part-time jobs. Harakawa-kun rode off on his motorcycle right away."

Sayama glanced behind them and Shinjou followed his gaze while carrying a binder of loose leaf paper. About thirty students followed them.

"But about 70% of the class saw this as their top priority."

Sayama saw Shinjou turn an impressed look toward Ooki. Ooki on the other hand looked troubled.

"Sorry, Sayama-kun. I actually wanted to solidify the bonds of our class with a cookout, a campout, or a marines-style training camp."

"I will kindly ignore that last one, but you should not feel bad about using the Tamiya household instead."

"I know. And your home knows the trick to creating a good festival stand."

Shinjou tilted his head at that.

"I thought the Tamiya family ran a security company? Do they do construction too?"

"No, they just so happen to have a lot of specialists like that. Mr. Kim from China joined the company about four years ago and he is really good at building sturdy mobile stands."

"Really?"

"Yes. The only problem is he likes to add bulletproof shields, GPS, and escape devices if you are not careful. … He takes it seriously, don't you think? Ha ha ha."

"I-I think he might be building something other than a festival stand."

"But we won the award for best stand last year!" added Ooki.

"Yes. Thinning the armor paid off in the high-speed cruising. And by giving it electronic controls inside, a commander and driver could take on a great number of people on their own. It was quite powerful."

"S-sorry, but what are we talking about here?"

"A crepe stand. Have you never seen one? They are quite common."

"Oh? So stands that can fly are common?"

"Do not worry about it."

Sayama patted Shinjou's shoulder.

Shinjou looked up at him with a hint of dissatisfaction in his eyes.

But Sayama's eyes were fixed on the binder Shinjou held in his arms.

Shinjou must have noticed what he was looking at because he held the binder tighter as if to protect it.

"U-um. I…uh…didn't bring this so I could avoid helping prepare."

"You did not want to let go of it, did you?"

That was a part of it, but Shinjou lowered his head and blushed.

"I finished the plot, so I wanted you to take a look at it. …Would that be a problem?"

"Why would it be a problem?"

"Well…" said Shinjou as he looked around.

Ooki had faced forward once more and was humming. The other students were speaking with their friends. No one was paying any attention to them.

Shinjou quickly moved closer and whispered so only Sayama could hear.

"I think you might figure it out if you read it."

"Figure what out?"

Shinjou stopped walking for an instant.

He lowered his head and did not look toward Sayama.

And so Sayama asked another question.

"You mean I will figure something out if I read this plot, correct?"

"Y-yes."

Shinjou raised his head, revealing his slightly reddened face.

And then…

"…"

Shinjou's shoulders trembled and he wrapped his arms around his stomach.

As Shinjou seemed to shrink back, Sayama wrapped his arms around his back.

"Is something wrong?"

"N-no. I'm fine."

Shinjou's raised head showed a weak smile.

Shinjou checked to make sure no one was watching them and spoke.

"Th-this happens sometimes. About once a month, I get this feeling like my stomach is sinking down. …It hadn't happened recently, but it just came now."

"Hm. This is a touchy subject, so I will try to ask this tactfully: is it your period?"

"Has the meaning of the word 'tactfully' changed since I last checked?" Shinjou sighed. "Not to mention that I don't have a period."

From his expression as he spoke, Shinjou seemed to be fine now.

But when he finished speaking, his eyebrows lowered and Sayama was fairly certain he saw a disappointed look on his face.

At any rate, Sayama nodded.

"When we arrive at the Tamiya household, I will have Kouji prepare you a hot drink. Also, I think Ryouko has an excellent painkiller. You can take some."

"Medicines don't have much effect on me."

"Not to worry. The Tamiya family's secret original formula uses no chemical additives. According to Ryouko, half of the drug is made from 'mercy'."

"And is the other half made from 'absolute seriousness'? Are you sure it's okay?"

"Of course it is okay. I tried some once. The next thing I knew, three days had passed and I was surrounded by tons of people."

"That isn't okay at all!"

Shinjou sighed, lowered his shoulders, and looked forward.

Sayama faced forward as well.

The path opened up ahead of them and a large flat silhouette surrounded by a fence came into view.

That tile-roofed mansion with a large yard was the Tamiya household. Trees, large stones, and a pond were visible over the tall fence and the vast mansion sat in the center.

Shinjou sighed again and this time it was a mixture of relief and wonder.

He realized everyone had stopped walking and Ooki stood before the gate.

"Um… Oryaaah!"

She pushed on the gate, but it did not open.

Sayama and Shinjou watched on, wondering what she was planning to do. Ooki tilted her head and then clapped her hands together in realization. She knocked on the gate and let out a shout.

"I request an audience with the master of the house!"

"Ooki-sensei, what era do you think it is?"

"Eh? But the gate opened on its own when they said that on TV yesterday."

"That was the TV drama version of Tsujigiri Samurai that began yesterday at eight. Can you not see the intercom next to the gate?"

"Oh, you're right." Ooki brought a finger to the intercom. "Ding-dong, ding-dong, ding-dong, ding, ding, ding… Sixteen in a row! …Ow ow ow ow ow! What kind of student hits their teacher's head sixteen times in a row, Sayama-kun!?"

"Shut up. For the sake of mankind's sanity, never touch that intercom again. Got it?"

As soon as he said that, Sayama sensed a presence to his right.

He felt the air move in toward the side of his non-dominant hand.

"I see you haven't changed, Mikoto."

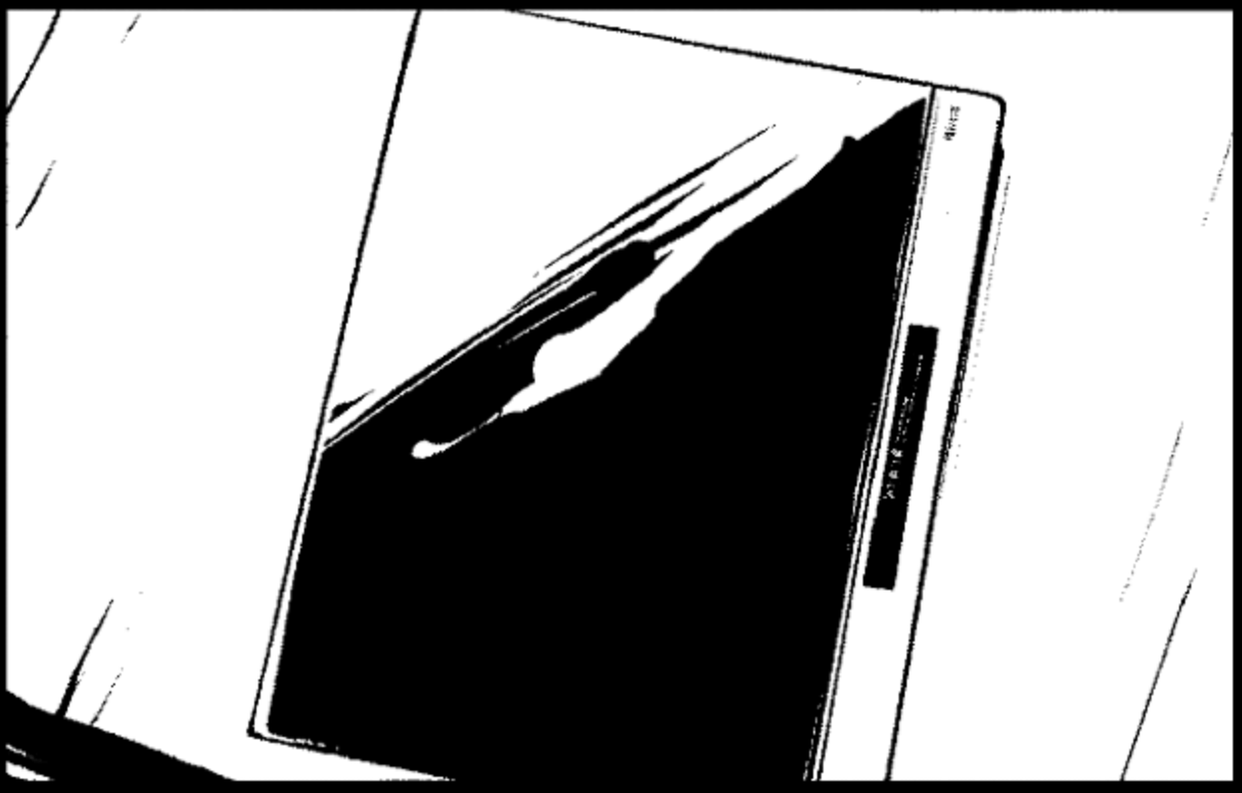
Sayama heard a husky voice and all of a sudden found himself looking up at the blue sky.

He had been thrown through the air.

Chapter 13: Blooming World

Chapter 13

“Blooming World”



The desire to convey something awaits you
Does it wait behind your blooming back in the past?
Or in your budding arms in the present?

The desire to convey something awaits you

Does it wait behind your blooming back in the past?

Or in your budding arms in the present?

Sayama frantically thought while flying through the air.

He was facing upwards and the rotation of his body was compact.

It had been a surprisingly quick throw.

If he twisted his body to bring his feet to the ground, his momentum would cause him to topple over.

What should he do?

The correct answer was to twist his body, bring a single foot to the ground, and throw his other foot forward.

He would use the momentum of the throw to run forward.

And he did so.

His foot struck the ground.

After a single footstep, he moved his other foot forward and took his second step with the momentum of his spin.

He could not eliminate the momentum, but he could control it. He twisted on his toes to turn and face his opponent.

He took a large step backwards and lowered his hips in case of a second attack.

He reached for Baku on his shoulder, but the creature had not fallen.

He completed his defensive stance while performing that check.

But no second attack came.

"…"

Sayama faced forward while relaxing a bit.

He saw Ooki and Shinjou looking surprised, but a small figure had joined them.

It was an old man wearing a black T-shirt and a mountain vest.

He had short gray hair and his right eye was red.

Seeing that color, Sayama spoke his name.

"Hiba-sensei."

"Hi," said Hiba.

"Long time no see, you immortal old man," said Sayama with a small smile and a hand raised in greeting. "Why have you descended from the mountain today? Did you forget how to speak the language of man, so you had to come relearn it?"

"It's been a while since I heard your nonsensical polite speech." Hiba smiled and raised a hand of his own. "I had been wondering why you haven't been stopping by

the dojo lately, but I see you've been living a normal life. I gathered some nice mountain vegetables today, so I was bringing some to the Tamiya family. When I heard you'd be coming, I knew I had to show you who's boss."

Shinjou walked up from the side and tugged on Sayama's sleeve.

"I gather he's your teacher, but do you not get along?"

"Of course we get along. We get along well enough to knock each other to the ground. Right, Hiba-sensei?"

"That's right. We're always like this."

The smile vanished from Hiba's eyes as he observed Sayama's stance.

The smile only remained on his lips.

"You were careless to let your friend distract you like that, but you haven't gotten rusty, have you?"

Kashima and Tsukuyomi faced each other within a partition of the UCAT development department's design room.

The rest of the design room's personnel had already left for the Showa Memorial Park.

Kashima was chatting a bit with Tsukuyomi in the empty room.

However, she had suddenly glanced at her watch while he discussed his family.

"Now, I think I will head to the Showa Memorial Park like Director Abram suggested."

"?"

"I will handle the preliminary negotiations for the Leviathan Road, but what about you? Will you be coming?"

"To be honest, I don't think so." He shrugged. "Will he be coming?"

"You mean Sayama Mikoto? He will of course be there . Do you think he can find the answer, Kashima?"

"I don't know. But I think we should give him the same thing my grandfather gave Ooshiro Hiromasa. Take this to the preliminary negotiations."

Kashima inserted a nearby floppy disk into his laptop.

He operated the laptop for just an instant.

He copied a single piece of data and ejected the disk.

He put the unlabeled floppy in a case and wrote on the case in marker.

He wrote "List of 2nd-Gear Residents".

"These are the countless names used to create Totsuka. Another file contains Yamata's question."

"The names used to create Totsuka?"

"Yes. Totsuka required enough power and capacity to seal Yamata, so names were used in its construction. The countless names of the 2nd-Gear residents who were

connected to the biosphere via their names were incorporated into the metal." Kashima nodded. "But because the seal was to occur within Low-Gear, Low-Gear names were used instead. In other words, they used our current names. …My grandfather gave this list to someone who then investigated Japan's shrines and temples to find the names that corresponded to our original names."

"Was Ooshiro Hiromasa the one to looked up those names?"

"Yes. My grandfather apparently forged Totsuka while looking at the list of names Ooshiro Hiromasa wrote for him." He took a breath. "Ooshiro Hiromasa also discovered the answer to Yamata's question, but I think this list may have served as a hint. So if you give this floppy to that boy, the situation should be almost identical to back then. He will have our names and the question."

"But what about him? Ooshiro Hiromasa risked his life to seal Yamata, but do you think this boy will go as far?"

"Yes. I think he views the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear as important enough to risk his entire existence on."

The day before, that boy had said he wanted to go through with this Leviathan Road so he could face the other Gears afterwards.

…He will not choose to back off.

And what would that boy do afterwards?

Would he learn of the past, learn what those who came before him thought, and try to approach those thoughts himself?

Kashima then recalled Sayama holding his chest in the cafeteria.

That boy felt pain when he learned of the past.

"…"

…So that's it. He has accepted even the past. He is Susanoo.

That boy was honest to himself, did not lie, and gained everything.

In that case, what was Kashima?

…No, I haven't officially chosen to confront him, so it's too early to think about that.

Kashima suddenly realized Tsukuyomi was staring at him.

He recalled the floppy disk, shrugged, and held it out to her.

She took it with a bitter smile.

She then used her other hand to strike his head.

"You have a serious problem with getting lost in thought. Did you know that?"

And she suddenly said something else.

"I heard you were thinking about quitting UCAT."

That unexpected comment left Kashima flustered.

"I-it was Atsuta that told you, wasn't it?" he said while scratching his head. "He can be really talkative about the weirdest things."

"He's worried about you, so don't be too hard on him. …But are you serious about this?"

"I'm not going to hand you a letter of resignation right away if that's what you're worried about. UCAT pays well, so I'll stick around long enough to pay off my mortgage and save up for Harumi's tuition."

"Oh, how responsible. She's still a baby, but you're already planning to send her to private school?"

"I don't know, but I think I'll go discuss this with my parents."

"About whether to choose a private school?"

"No. About me and my family. My choice here will directly affect my family's finances."

"I suppose that's true. You can take this afternoon off and head to your parents' home." Tsukuyomi's bitter smile deepened and her tone grew exasperated. "You really are worrying over all of this, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. There's just no connection between me and 2nd-Gear, so…"

"So you want to pass the truth of 2nd-Gear on to me and leave the front line?"

"Yes, I think that would be best. That Sayama boy I met last night has his own stance toward the Leviathan Road: the surname Sayama indicates a villain. That stance brought 1st-Gear to UCAT's side and now he's facing us."

"He is quite brave."

"Yes, but at this rate, I would be giving him our answer without a stance of my own." He nodded. "So instead of pretending I understand, I will give someone else the word to control Yamata and then I will leave. Giving the word to you would work."

…What will this Sayama boy think of that?

Given the history of 2nd-Gear and his association with UCAT, would he accept it?

Kashima realized his thoughts were turning toward what was convenient to him, so he stopped thinking.

Meanwhile, Tsukuyomi lowered her shoulders and sighed.

But her expression suddenly grew serious and she spoke up.

“One thing.”

“What is it?”

A short silence followed.

Those few seconds contained hesitation.

She used that time to look at him like she was observing him.

She then scratched her head as if having a hard time finding the right words to use.

“Kashima, do you think you’re conflicted on this issue ?”

"Yes, quite a bit."

His response was perfectly casual.

Tsukuyomi replied with a single question.

"Kashima," she began. "Why are you this conflicted?"

Natsu was speaking on the phone.

She was sitting on the floor with the window to her left .

She held Harumi within a towel in her right arm and her left hand weakly held the black phone receiver.

She was watching the weather forecast on the muted television, but she closed her eyes when she saw the symbol for rain.

She instead opened her mouth and spoke.

"Yes, thank you so much for the vegetables. I made all sorts of things right away. Yes, Akio-san seemed to find it a bother." She laughed a bit. "I would like to thank

your husband as well. …Eh? He ticked you off during a fight over the remote, so you locked him in the storage shed? It's been 12 hours now? You two always get along so well. Hee hee. By the way, I would like to stop by for a visit before long. Are you planting the rice soon? Oh, in three days?"

She turned toward the wall.

The calendar hanging on the wall had no red circles around the dates for the next few days.

After checking that, Natsu turned her attention back to the phone.

"That should be fine. I'll take Harumi with me, but I think Akio-san will try to come up with an excuse to not go."

Her eyes bent in a smile and she looked down into her arm.

Harumi was curled up in her arm sleeping.

"Yes, you have been a lot of help with Harumi. You taught me how to hold her and how to care for her. Akio-san thinks I knew it all from the beginning. …Eh? If

he doesn't think I'm clever he won't let me control the finances? And I need to add in the spice of a bit of violence? I'm not very good at that kind of thing. I'm not sure I can do it."

Natsu smiled bitterly, but her eyebrows suddenly lowered weakly.

She cast her eyes down a bit.

"I think Akio-san has been worrying about something lately. Does he think our marriage-… Oh, I see. Sorry. But then what is it?" She tilted her head. "I think it probably has to do with his job, but he has a friend at work who is reliable in a certain sense of the word. Have you two noticed anything?"

A short pause followed.

After that discouraging time passed, Natsu received a response. However, that response caused her face to cloud over.

"You don't know? I didn't really think you would."

She almost sighed, but gulped instead so the phone would not pick it up.

"I try not to say anything about his job, but I can't help but worry. His sense of responsibility can be too strong sometimes."

She glanced toward her left hand holding the receiver and then down toward her own neck. A ring hung down from a necklace there.

"Yes, thank you for being so considerate. Yes, he takes everything so seriously, so I want to avoid putting any unnecessary burden on him. …I can more or less guess what he's thinking."

After a few seconds, Natsu raised her head and nodded.

"Yes, I am confident."

Her expression was just as confident as she said, but she was blushing slightly.

"I think he wants to work. He is past thirty, so it is about time he began thinking about what he can and can't do in his life. …No, the thought came to me after

marrying him and giving birth to Harumi. When I was in the Takagi family, I knew nothing of the world and didn't think about anything."

She smiled bitterly and moved her eyebrows.

Harumi opened her eyes in her arm. Natsu lightly rocked Harumi and she narrowed her eyes.

"Oh, Harumi just woke up. Yes, I will put her on. Haru-chan?"

Natsu held the receiver in front of Harumi and the child stretched out her small hands.

"Ah…dah..." said Harumi.

Natsu smiled and brought the receiver back to her ear.

"Did you hear her?" Her smile loosened at the response from the phone. "Thank you very much. Yes, quite a lot. Yes, I will make sure to drag Akio-san out there sometime soon. Yes, the girls outnumber him two-to-one, so he can't win."

With a smile, she gave a word of parting, dragged the black phone over, and returned the receiver to it.

The quiet tone of a bell was followed by complete silence.

Natsu looked at Harumi in her arm and turned toward the veranda.

Beyond the large opened window, most of the potted plants lined up on a shelf in the small yard were blooming.

The flowers were white, blue, purple, red, scarlet, and more white.

The flowers that were not blooming would bloom during a different season.

“Haru-chan, those are the flowers of spring.”

She looked at the different colored flowers and then up into the sky.

A bit of white was mixed in with the blue of the sky. The clouds were densest to the south and those clouds would bring in rain.

Natsu lightly bit her lower lip as she watched those gray clouds.

"It's going to rain again," she finally said.

Tsukuyomi had asked why Kashima was as conflicted as he was.

That simple string of words got to the core of the issue.

That was why Kashima found himself unable to answer right away.

He lightly closed his eyes and thought.

…*Why?*

He wanted to answer. He wanted to answer with his thoughts.

He first thought of Natsu.

"I am denying my power."

The instant he said that, Tsukuyomi spoke up.

"No. You aren't denying your power."

"…"

Kashima stood up from his chair without thinking.

…*How?*

"How can you say that? For eight years now, I have-…."

"You are conflicted."

Tsukuyomi stood to face him with a pleasant smile on her lips.

"But," she said. "Why are you so conflicted? Isn't it because you can't deny your power? If you had denied it, wouldn't you have long since quit UCAT and focused on your family?"

And…

"And while you were feeling so conflicted, you saw someone who was fighting against their own confliction, didn't you?"

Kashima had no answer for that.

Tsukuyomi sighed with a troubled look.

"Remember this: the more you desire something, the more confliction you will feel. You want to be both a part of Low-Gear and of 2nd-Gear, so you find yourself unable to choose and you keep lying. But…"

"But?"

Tsukuyomi folded her arms and brushed up her hair.

"I think that is also the state of 2nd-Gear as a whole."

Kashima felt himself tremble a little when he heard that.

"Kashima, you need to give this thought. Your parents chose the truthful path of completely joining Low-Gear, but not many people can make that decision. Even I am not telling my daughter about UCAT or 2nd-Gear."

"…"

"This is why you are qualified to represent us in the Leviathan Road. Do not try to rush this. The time will

come when you can make your decision and you will choose Low-Gear, 2nd-Gear, or maybe some third path. But at the same time…"

"At the same time?"

"Do not try to give an answer until that time comes. And while you still feel conflicted and cannot make up your mind, do not try to give anyone else the word to control Yamata." Tsukuyomi took a breath and gave one last question. "Is that clear?"

"Testament."

His weak affirmation was met by lowered shoulders and a nod from Tsukuyomi.

"Then I will be on my way to Tachikawa. I will tell Sayama Mikoto that you will eventually make up your mind."

"Thank you."

"Don't give me that look. Take a break and go ask your parents for advice. You might find the way to your answer there. Also…"

She placed the floppy in her lab coat pocket.

In its place, she pulled out a white card.

“What is that?”

She ignored his question and placed the card on the desk.

“Your past is in there.”

“You don’t mean!”

He instinctually stepped back and saw the card was a keycard for a production room.

And the card did not have a 1 for the 1st Production Room used by the newcomers or a 2 for the 2nd Production Room used for research.

“That 3 stands for the 3rd Production Room…”

“Yes. What you abandoned is still there. And it is precisely because you abandoned it that you want it so much now.” Tsukuyomi nodded toward him. “You feel conflicted because you want an answer and you want an answer to bring an end to your confliction. If you feel like

it, go face what lies in that room. Then you should understand what you have lost as you stand in the gap between confliction and an answer."

With that said, she turned around.

Kashima heard her receding footsteps and one last comment.

"It's worth doing at least that much."

At half past noon, Sayama left the Tamiya household and walked to the train station.

For once, Izumo and Kazami travelled by foot along with him.

"It seems Chisato has some ideas about a few mysteries," said Izumo.

She apparently had some issues they could discuss while riding the train to the preliminary negotiations.

After Sayama had told Hiba and the others he had to leave, Shinjou had handed him something.

It was the black loose-leaf binder Shinjou had been carrying with him.

Sayama had not forgotten the slight look of fear on his face as he handed the binder over.

To calm Shinjou down, Sayama had promised to read it eventually and he now held it under his arm.

The sky above was clear, but gathering clouds were visible in the distance and the wind was strong.

"This is nice weather for a preliminary negotiation. I feel like humming a yodel."

"Hey, idiot. Enough about yodeling. Just tell me what you plan to do about this negotiation and 2nd-Gear's Leviathan Road as a whole. They don't look too motivated."

"My answer is incredibly simple, so listen closely." Sayama took a breath and looked up into the sky. "I will confront them expectantly as I wait to see if they are a lazy serpent or a sleeping dragon."

Afterword

Here we are at Owari no Chronicle 2-A.

Fortunately, Volume 1 was well received, so I should be able to write the rest. It feels like a miracle.

It is due to all of you, so thank you very much.

I will continue to do my best, so please keep reading.

Now for a bit of information concerning the novel.

The Showa Memorial Park is a real place. (Susaou isn't there, though.) It has a website, so check it out if you are interested. I hope this will spread interest in the place.

The former airfield near the park still has not been used for anything, but it was opened up to the public recently. The closed railway line next to the line I always use leads to that airfield. When you look into it, you find that place names and the like allow pieces of the past to live on.

As I said before, you can find a lot of connections to the war even though it has been 60 years.

Anyway, time for my chat with a friend.

"To start off with, did you read it?"

"Yes, I looked through it. But…"

"But what?"

"I hear you're planning to start switching out who you speak with in the afterword."

"Well, people will get tired of the same crazy person every time. Even an all-star messes up sometimes."

"I'm sorry that I'm too reasonable a person to help you out."

"You just helped out plenty, idiot. More importantly, give me your thoughts on the novel."

"Why wasn't there more of the cat? There was plenty of the cat last time. This book is terrible!"

"Don't judge a book by the cat content!"

"What else am I supposed to judge it on? Anyway, Setsu-kun said some nonsense in his sleep, but I apparently say some pretty amazing stuff in my sleep."

"I know. When you stayed over at my place before, you slept on your side, started moving like an inchworm, and groaned 'pineapple, pineapple!' What was that?"

"Maybe I was possessed by a demon."

"I can testify for you on that one. Do you have any other stories of strange things you said in your sleep?"

"Well, I fell asleep in high school one day and woke up to find myself collapsed between the desks and covered in blood."

"Sorry, but that isn't talking in your sleep."

"Apparently, I suddenly shouted 'zero gravity!' and launched myself from my chair. It was pretty bad when the hospital asked me how I hurt myself. My teacher and I explained the situation using a chair."

"I feel sorry for your teacher."

"I was told not to do it again, but I don't really remember the launch. Next time I do it, it will feel like the first time to me."

"Don't do it, you idiot. But it sounds like the pineapple incident I saw was relatively normal."

"I have a lot of variations."

I wish he didn't.

Anyway, my BGM while writing this novel was Himekami's Kamigami no Uta. I'm listening to it again while I proofread.

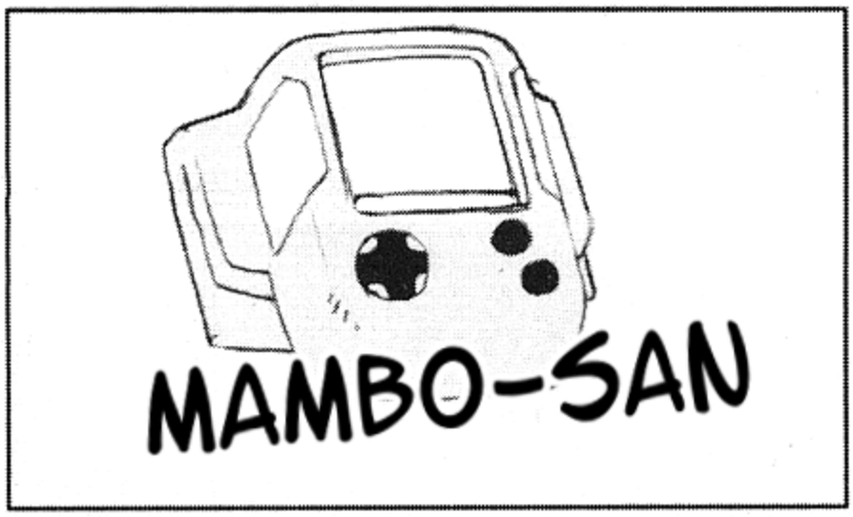
"Who is it that is lying?"

I am giving that question some thought.

I hope to have various characters start to move more quickly in Part B.

On a suddenly sunny June morning in 2003.

-Kawakami Minoru

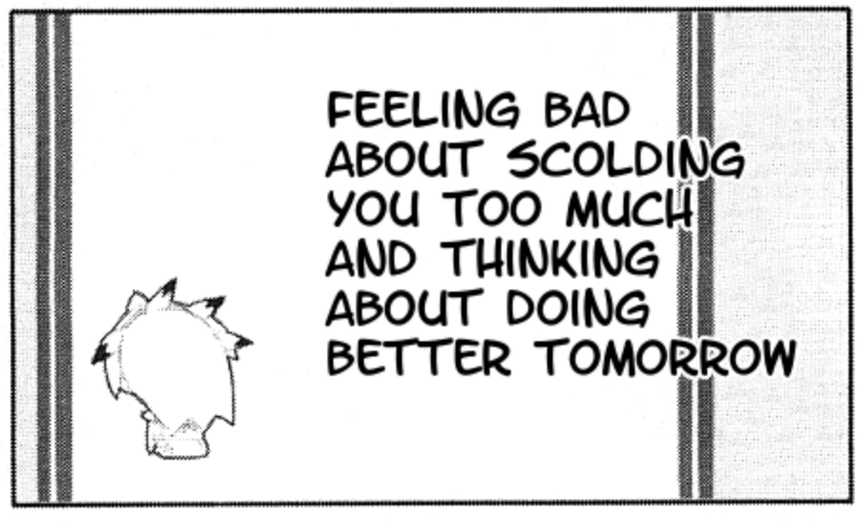


Afterword

Omake Guy

(Tentative)

Satoyasu.



Omake Page:

Title: Afterword Omake Guy (Tentative)

Credit: Satoyasu.

Bottom text: Boy

Panel 1: Mambo-san

Panel 2: Dancing

Panel 3: Scolding

Panel 4: Feeling bad about scolding you too much and thinking about doing better tomorrow

Notes

1. ↑ Nico is Japanese onomatopoeia for smiling.
2. ↑ Takagi literally means “tall tree”.
3. ↑ Ooshiro means “great castle”.
4. ↑ The name Ichiroumaru can be interpreted as the number 160.